魔法科高校の劣等生 12

ダブルセブン編

The irregular at magic high school



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魔法科高校の劣等生⑫
ダブルセブン編

西暦二〇九六年四月。司波達也と深雪は二年生に進級した。今までの目覚ましい活躍と実績が考慮され、今年度から新設された魔法工学科コースの生徒となった達也は、深雪の意向で彼女と同じく生徒会副会長にも抜擢される。

今年こそ、深雪と共に平穏な学校生活を……と考えていた達也だったが、『新入生』たちはそれを許さなかった。

七宝琢磨。入試成績トップとして、今年度の新入生総代を務めた『エリート』で、十師族の脇を固める師補十八家の一つ『七宝家』の長男。

七草香澄、七草泉美。十師族のひとつ『七草家』の長女・七草真由美の双子の妹たち。

同じ数字を持つ『ナンバーズ』の三人が、魔法科高校で波乱を巻き起こし——。
新展開突入！



さ-14-12

魔法科高校の劣等生⑫
ダブルセブン編

佐島勤

電撃文庫





佐島勤

西暦19XX年、日本の片田舎に生まれる。和洋のスペースオペラを糧に少年時代を過ごす。青年時代、ファンタジーと伝奇小説に転向。卒業後、企業戦士（ただし雑兵）として現実世界に魂を売り渡すも、西暦2011年、遅れてきたジュブナイル作家として空想世界に帰還を果たす。（本プロフィールには虚偽と誇張表現が含まれています）

【電撃文庫作品】

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魔法科高校の劣等生⑫ ダブルセブン編

イラスト：石田可奈

西暦19XX年生まれ。挿絵は初仕事。本業はアニメーター。アニメ『俺の妹。』の総作画監督を担当。『魔法科高校』でもいよいよ本領発揮！

SpecialThanks：ジミーストーンさん。金子恵美さん。



魔法科高校の劣等生 12

The irregular at magic high school

ダブルセブン編

佐島勤

Tsutomu Sato

illustration／石田可奈

Kana Ishida

illustrator assistant／ジニー・ストーン、末永康子

design／BEE-PEE


「お姉ちゃんから離れろ！このナンパ男！」
「深雪先輩のような方と同じ学舎に通えるなんて……私（わたくし）、感激です」
七草泉美
さえぐさ・いずみ
今年、魔法科高校に入学した『新入生』。七草真由美の妹。香澄の双子の妹。大人しく穏やかな性格。
七草香澄
さえぐさ・かすみ
今年、魔法科高校に入学した『新入生』。七草真由美の妹。泉美の双子の姉。元気で快活な性格。



「雑草（ウィード）のアンタに言われたくない！」

七宝琢磨
しっぽう・たくま

今年の『新入生』総代を務める生徒。一科生。有力魔法師の家系「師補十八家」のひとつ『七宝』の長男。



「俺に言われるのは不満か？」

司波達也
しば・たつや

司波兄妹の兄。国立魔法大学付属第一高校2年E組所属。新設された魔工科に進学した。全てに達観している。妹・深雪の『ガーディアン』。


「……ふん」
十文字克人
じゅうもんじ・かつと
前・部活連会頭。現在は魔法大学に進学している。『十師族』のひとつ、十文字家の長男。達也曰く『巌（いわお）のような人物』。
「卒業式から一ヶ月も経たないけど……何だか見違えちゃったね、達也くん」
七草真由美
さえぐさ・まゆみ
前・生徒会長。現在は魔法大学一年生。十師族・七草家の長女。小柄な身体だが、体型はグラマー。遠隔精密魔法の分野で十年に一人の英才と呼ばれている。性格は小悪魔的。


「ほう……七宝の喧嘩を七草が買う、ってのか」
「そうだね、目一杯安く買い叩いてあげる。二度と七草に喧嘩を売ろうなんて考えないくらい」



十三束 鋼
とみつか・はがね

２年Ｅ組。『レンジ・ゼロ』（射程距離ゼロ）の異名を持つ。魔法を併用した徒手格闘術『マーシャル・マジック・アーツ』の使い手。


「お兄様、良くお似合いです……」
「はい、深雪姉さま」
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
司波兄妹の妹。2年A組所属。魔法科高校に主席で入学したエリート。『花冠（ブルーム）』と呼ばれる一科生徒で、得意分野は『冷却魔法』。唯一の愛すべき欠点は『重度のブラコン』。
桜井水波
さくらい・みなみ
今年、魔法科高校に入学した『新入生』。達也、深雪の従兄弟という立場をとる、深雪のガーディアン候補。

Introduction

It had been 97 years since the day that the supernatural power which heralded the arrival of what is now known as modern magic was observed by the USA at the time. It had been approximately 80 years since the development of magical techniques turned into the development and human modification of Magicians.

During this brief period of time, no, actually it was an even shorter time, as it only took 50 years or so to create a stable production of powerful Magicians – the "bloodlines" that belonged to "famous lineages of Magicians". Upon further consideration, this was a rather astounding fact - In a mere half century, they had successfully developed the "race" known as Magicians.

Of course, there were a host of reasons lurking in the background. In order to bring about this possibility, more developed countries invested massive scientific as well as economic resources and began a furious competition. Since the start of the latter half of the previous century, energy depletion had turned into a dreaded future that hung like a dark shadow in the hearts of the people (in more developed countries). Furthermore, after 2030 AD, the Earth had noticeably cooled, which was then accompanied by the ensuing food shortage. Caused by the infighting for food and resources, the Third World War became a powerful impetus for the development of Magicians – to the point that basic human rights, a core pillar of society, were abandoned.

Even before the 20 chaotic years of war, the entire globe had already somewhat publicly conducted "human modification" and "human breeding projects", all in the name of developing a race called Magicians. The fact that magic could be inherited had already been acknowledged in the age where magic was held to be a superpower, which only served to legitimize the progress of magical development towards the creation of "superior bloodlines".

From the perspective of modifying the human species, developed countries used science to trample human dignity.

The creation of artificial wombs first began in the more developed countries.

Among the less developed countries, individuals with the potential were forced to mate – practically to the extent where nationally sanctioned rape

was allowed to occur. However, among the more developed countries, cloning pre-fertilized zygotes and non-surgical methods to gather sperm – "gene selection" – were used to obtain large amounts of reproductive material to fertilize artificial wombs, hereby creating a more efficient approach to the development of Magicians. Genetic modification actually turned out to be the minority. Massive production of "test tube babies" without genetic modification was the true face of the development of Magicians in more developed countries.

Fortunately – that was one way of putting it, given the dissonance between the advances in science and human nature – children born from cloned embryos all died young for some unknown reason. The manner of their birth negatively affected them all. Based on metrics gathered by more developed countries, their average life expectancy was approximately 7 years. Infant mortality lowering the life expectancy was actually not the primary reason. Their lives were really that short, given that the oldest among them died at the age of 17. In addition, their deaths were not caused by rapid aging, but a natural death at a young age. Lives born from natural births failed to display this shortcoming, leading to suspicion that the problem may lie in cellular mitosis.

Still, latent magical talent could be measured at the age of 3. Thanks to their sacrifice, the correct method of matching embryos and zygotes was discovered. This had a profound impact on the second and third generations, to the point that genetic simulations could be used for analysis. Thenceforth, a country only needed to use arranged interviews as an excuse to pair marriage partners, intentionally prompting the families to independently marry on their own.

Thus was born the families renowned in modern magic. In Japan, they were represented by the Ten Master Clans.

The reason why Japan's "famous lineages of Magicians" became the most refined application in the world was because amongst the various cultural backgrounds for the most developed countries, Japan had the easiest time accepting this sort of marriage relationship.

Isn't it ironic that scientific advancements that were utterly inhumane were ultimately at the mercy of cultural motivations? Or, should this be the ultimate manifestation of the resilience of "humanity"? That detail will likely be decided by history.

Prologue

A small village sat at the narrow basin tucked between the mountains in the old Yamanashi Prefecture that bordered the old Nagano Prefecture. One with no name. One that was not displayed on the maps precisely because it had no name. Despite calling it a "village", it was not a village officially planned by the government, nor was it a village that naturally occurred thanks to the people congregating together before the modern era. In truth, it was merely a village for people to live in.

Excluding the fact that there was no name, it was just an ordinary village. Put another way, everything was present save for the name. There was a town hall, police station, fire station, and both the water and electricity were running. The roads were all paved correctly and there was even a school. The only school in the village probably served as both elementary and middle school.

Thanks to the thick clouds in the grim February sky endlessly casting down snow below, a layer of silvery white covered the entire village. Maybe it was because all the villagers were indoors, but outside it was incredibly quiet. There were very few people about, and excluding a group of exactly ten people walking forward, the streets were entirely empty. The lone exception, this group of ten, was currently headed towards the other end of the village, where the village stood with its back facing the mountain. They all wore white camouflage and carried packs of the same color with rifles on over their shoulders.

From a classroom on the second floor, a young girl wearing a sailor uniform watched this dangerous crowd approach. She rose from her seat and approached the window while looking downwards at the fully armed men. She was the only person in the classroom, though frankly, she was the only person in the entire campus at this point. Today was not a weekend, nor a holiday or even an extended break. Maybe the other students knew that the armed crowd was coming and fled for safety. Still, that failed to explain why the young girl remained in the classroom. It was apparent that not only the students but even the teachers had evacuated, so a single female middle school student remaining behind was flat out beyond comprehension.

Dead ahead of the young girl's gaze, the men unslung their rifles at the school gates. They held their rifles at waist height and split to the left and right along the wall. Three towards the left and three towards the right. Of

the four left in the middle, two of them hefted their rifles while the other two set down their packs and removed some sort of item.

The young girl took out a thin, long object from the pocket in her skirt. The machine she held in her hand was very similar to the "tablets" that existed a hundred years ago in an age where information terminals and primary verbal communication devices were called "cellphones". The young girl pressed the power switch above the number pad, disabled the standby phase, and began channeling psions into the small device.

The machine in the young girl's hand was a terminal-shaped CAD. Ergo, the young girl was a Magician.

She was watching the two people that stood in the back of the quartet, the ones who had just finished aiming what looked to be RPG-equipped rifles at the school. At that moment—

The young girl's finger flew across the CAD and activated her magic.

The two men from the armed group brought out RPGs from their backpacks. Rather than focusing on penetration, the short, stubby head was meant to raise the ensuing damage from the shrapnel at the time of explosion, thus limiting its range to within 200 meters. There was less than 1/5 of that distance from the school gates to the school buildings, which was well within the ideal targeting range. However, the explosion never impacted the classroom that the young lady was in.

Ten meters away from the window where the young girl was standing, the RPG round exploded. The flames from the detonation seemed to lap around an invisible wall as it mushroomed outward and the force of the explosion rebounded towards the armed group. The metal fragments within the RPG round rained over the kneeling men. Though the shrapnel had basically lost all of its power and could not harm them, this was sufficient to raise their hackles and wariness.

The two men in the front dropped their packs and started loading grenades onto their rifles. The men who fired the first shots were also reloading. They were well aware that the earlier phenomenon was the result of magic. The reason that the glass in the windows remained undamaged by the grenades' explosions was because a barrier had materialized, and had properties which repelled heat, sound, and kinetic energy. Still, the men also knew that a magical barrier would collapse if struck by attacks that surpassed its capacity.

This time all four RPGs fired at the same time. Though there was plainly no sign of verbal coordination, their synchronization remained perfect. Even if one round was unable to penetrate the barrier, then shouldn't the impact and heat generated by all four rounds detonating together overwhelm the barrier? That was the thought running through their minds. Even if this experiment to nullify magic failed, the rebounding shrapnel and force would not be able to harm them. That much had already been proven.

The grenades once again detonated in midair. Much like the first time, the flames from the detonation of all four rounds seemed to spread across a transparent barrier. The only difference, however, lay in the location of that barrier.

Rather than being erected 10 meters from the school building, this time the barrier was erected approximately 5 meters away from the men. To be precise, a fresh barrier was deployed the moment they squeezed the trigger. From this close proximity, the explosive force and scattered shrapnel reflected back onto the men. Though they wore goggles, anything beneath the protective helmet was practically naked. The shrapnel had already shredded their faces without giving them any time to raise their hands to protect themselves. As a result, by the time they regained contact with the ground from the force of the explosion, all four of them had long since lost consciousness.

After verifying that the four targets were no longer moving, the young girl turned and departed from the window. Just as she arrived at the middle of the classroom, the door at the rear of the classroom was brutally shoved open. The young girl's fingers danced over the keypad as if on reflex, a clear result of endless training. She activated her magic just an instant before the gun-bearing man took a step into the classroom. One foot in the air, the man struck an invisible wall that caused him to lose his balance.

Less than one second later, the door in the forefront of the classroom also opened, but was likewise unable to enter the classroom. As if both of them were putting on a mummer's show, next to the man who was trying to shoulder his way through the invisible wall, a series of incredible shattering sounds were heard from the glass that separated the classroom from the hallway. Still, none of the shards of glass fell into the classroom and instead shot towards the third man who was trying to shatter the glass. The barriers devised by the young girl not only protected the door, but covered the entire length of the wall between the classroom and the hallway, including the windows and doors.

Just as she let out a sigh of relief after stopping the forced entries, the young girl noticed that the armed group she discovered contained 10 people. Among them, four had remained before her and the other six split between the left and right. Thanks to the effects of their own weapons, the four in the front had already been incapacitated while three others were being held back by her magic in the hallway. So, where were the last three?

A shrill shriek erupted from the window behind the young girl as it shattered to the floor. Men had unfurled ropes from the ceiling, leapt off from the wall and used their own bodies as a swinging hammer to crash through the windows. The instant she turned around, the young girl was already rolling for cover. Her skirt was rolled to a precarious height, but this was not the time to worry about that. As she hit the ground, she spied the men hefting their rifles after jumping in from the corner of her eye. The roar of gunfire and the bullet holes that pierced through the blackboard and the cabinets at the far end of the room proved her decision to be the correct one.

The barrier deployed against the hallway vanished. Thanks to fresh invaders drawing her attention, the Magic Sequence's renewal had been interrupted. The men performing the mummer's farce rolled in first. One came in through the back door while another jumped in through the windows. Now, the young girl was completely surrounded by an armed group of six men.

If this was any ordinary female middle school student, her body would already have been shaking in terror. At most, she might have been able to get to her feet, use both hands to contain her shaking and mask her fear while glaring defiantly back at the men, but that would be as far as that narrative went. Yet, this young lass was no ordinary female middle school student.

She got to her feet and sprinted for the back door. There, another man was waiting with a gun in hand, but she completely ignored this man. Seeing the young girl run straight in front of the gun barrel, the man was completely caught off guard. By the time he recovered his wits, there was barely two meters between the man and the young girl. This was too close a range for rifles, but there was no time to switch weapons. Given that he was against a female middle school student, the probability that the man would lose in close quarters combat was practically zero. Still, the man ultimately chose to fire with his weapon.

The other five were much faster on the draw. By the time the man standing in the backdoor of the classroom raised his rifle, the other five men had already squeezed the trigger.

Five gunshots were heard, with another coming a beat behind them.

In the next instant, six screams of pain could be heard.

Incoherent screams of pain erupted from the men's lips. Even if their opponent was a Magician, the amount of firepower was plainly overkill for a single young girl.

Nevertheless, the bullets were refracted by the physical object reflecting barrier conjured by the young girl and instead shot towards the gunmen.

The guns held by the men were all high powered rifles used against Magicians. In order to penetrate magic fields, these rifles fired penetrator rounds with increased firepower. If struck full on by these high powered bullets that were reflected back, even Kevlar crafted from high quality carbon plates would be useless. The men were sent flying by the impact of the bullets and fell unconscious in the middle, dripping blood all the while. A little lost, the young girl gazed down at them. She appeared to hesitate because she was unsure of what action to take next.

At this time, an old man's voice came across the transmitter.

"Exercise complete. Rescue teams please recover the Advisory Squad. Sakurai-san please report back to the mansion. Milady would like to speak to you directly."

Upon hearing the last few words, the young girl involuntarily straightened her back. With an anxious and stiff voice, she replied back "Understood" even though she knew the other side couldn't hear her.

◊ ◊ ◊

At first glance, this village was no different than any other village. From inside to out, there was an assortment of flat, blocky buildings made of concrete and steel that had no windows. As buildings that covered air bunkers below, all of these were mass produced during the time of the non-nuclear World War III. Given that these buildings dotted the landscape all over Japan, there was nothing surprising about seeing them here deep in the mountain. –Still, that was only for appearance's sake.

Yet, this village was not what it appeared to be. This village was a fully equipped experimental lab. The most carefully guarded secret and infamous "Magician Workshop of Death (Four)", this was the 4th Research and Development Lab for Magical Techniques. This location was both a base and the main headquarters for Magicians' modification and elimination for the Yotsuba Family of the Ten Master Clans.

The largest mansion in the village was the residence of the Yotsuba Family's main house. Among the large buildings atop an expansive piece of land, the greatest of them was reserved for the Yotsuba head of house, Yotsuba Maya, as her living quarters.

Now, in a certain room within that main building, a young girl stood stiffly with a nervous expression on her face before Maya.

The young girl's name was Sakurai Minami, a 15 year old young girl who was about to graduate from middle school and, at the same time, was the second generation of the modified "Sakura" series. Born of parents genetically engineered to grant them powerful magical abilities, she was also a Magician with strong magical powers. As a side note, neither of her parents were among the living. After losing her parents, Minami lived with the Yotsuba Family's main house while serving as a maid, all the while training to become a future guardian.

The "Sakura" series' specialty was creating heat resistant barriers that repelled physical objects. Though its functionality and variability were not on par with the Juumonji Family's "Phalanx", judged solely on its utility as a defensive mechanism, Minami was able to match the Juumonji Family's level even at the tender age of 15.

"Minami, first of all I want to thank you for a job well done. This performance was more than enough to rate you a pass."

"I am overwhelmed by your gracious praise. Thank you very much."

Compared to Maya's friendly words, Minami's tone was clearly tense and stilted. Not that she could be blamed for this, given that the woman sitting across from Minami was not merely her mistress. Even among the Ten Master Clans that dominated the upper echelons of Japanese Magicians, the Yotsuba Family was a particularly powerful clan. Not only was she the head of the Yotsuba Family, she was also feared as this generation's strongest Magician, the "Demon King of the Far East".

"Ah, there's no need to be humble. Don't you think so too, Hayama?"

Hayama, who had hitherto stood both silent and motionless behind Maya, spoke in a serious tone.

"Though points should be deducted for allowing the enemy to break through the window, the exercise still concluded with the successful incapacitation of all 10 targets. I believe this logically deserves a passing grade."

After hearing Hayama's words, Minami's eyes widened in shock. This was not because she felt that the evaluation was overly harsh. As the head butler who oversaw all the servants in the mansion, Hayama was scant with his praise towards subordinates, yet here he was giving a "pass" to a servant. To Minami's knowledge, this was the first time this had occurred. On top of that, she was the recipient of such praise, which only doubled her astonishment.

"Speaking of which, Minami-chan....."

"What is your will, milady?"

However, she didn't have the leisure to remain surprised. There was no way that the head of the Yotsuba Family would banter with a journeyman like herself simply to congratulate her on the results of the exercise. That much was clear without any deeper contemplation.

"You are about to graduate from middle school. Any thoughts on high school?"

"……Haven't decided."

"Really, are you still worrying about that?"

Worry was hardly the right word, given that the decision to enter high school was not something she could decide for herself. Minami was indentured to the Yotsuba Family. Even if she said that "she wanted to attend high school", so long as Maya or Hayama declared that to be "unnecessary", the point was moot. "Haven't decided" was akin to "Haven't received further orders", so Minami herself had no cause to worry.

"Then, Minami-chan, you will go to Tokyo."

This order caused Minami to feel 30% comprehension and 70% surprise. A year ago, Minami had heard that she would eventually be serving Miyuki. Still, she assumed that was far off in the future and at least after Miyuki returned to the main house. Though Miyuki's house in Tokyo was slightly

larger than the average dwelling, it was still within the boundaries of a typical residence. A full-time maid on staff would feel somewhat unnatural. Furthermore, a child who had just graduated from middle school would only deepen suspicion from others, Minami thought.

Her mistress swiftly answered the questions churning in her head.

"Go and attend First High."

Was First High referring to the National Magic University Affiliated First High? That was the only question in Minami's mind. Since she had been ordered to "head for Tokyo and attend First High", no further explanations were necessary.

Since registration was now done online, there was no need to worry about the registration deadline. Still, the problem was First High boasted the most difficult entrance examination among the schools. Without any formal tutoring to prepare for the exam, would she be able to pass? This caused Minami to feel deeply uneasy.

"You do not have to worry on account of the exam."

Were they going to use their connections to get her through? In truth, that was what Minami was hoping for.

"There's still 3 weeks until the exam. All the necessary information will be directly written into your brain."

However, that line of thinking was overly naïve. There was indeed such a device in this village that utilized brainwashing as a technique to directly carve necessary knowledge into a person's mind with or without their consent. Yet, that device seriously depleted a person's strength. She would likely be bedridden for a week after the exam.

"Do your best. You will be granted a period of time to rest after the exam. Likewise, from tomorrow onward, you are relieved of your duties as a maid."

As if sensing Minami's unease, Maya made this gentle yet merciless declaration – "You have no choice".

"Minami-chan."

"Present, milady."

Up until now, Maya's expression had been smiling, but now she was absolutely serious. Following her mistress's example, Minami tightened her expression.

"Go to Miyuki's side. Starting in the spring, Miyuki will be your mistress."

"Understood."

This was a mission that was originally assigned to her ahead of time. A steely determination lurking in the midst of her anxiety, Minami accepted Maya's orders.

Chapter 1

Thursday, April 5th, AD 2096. Today was the day before the opening ceremony of a new school year for the National Magic University Affiliated First High and three days before new student orientation.

In the house of the Shiba siblings, Tatsuya stood before a giant mirror that reflected his entire body with a discomfited expression on his face.

By his side, his sister Miyuki wore a dazzling smile like a flower in full bloom. Actually, before such a brilliant smile, even the cherry blossoms may wilt into buds out of shame. That radiant smile was enough to cause people to deem it "magical". Miyuki drew so much attention that even the existence of the newcomer standing beside her seemed to diminish. She was the new maid/bodyguard/houseguest sent by Yotsuba Maya to the siblings and would become their underclassman at First High in three days, Sakurai Minami.

With hopeful eyes that fairly shone, Miyuki smiled widely as she watched her brother in front of the mirror. On the cabinet next to the mirror, Tatsuya's new uniform jacket hung there after being delivered by mail last night.

"Onii-sama, please hurry and don your new uniform so I can see it. Or do you wish for Miyuki to be anxious……?"

Ignoring her would probably throw Miyuki into a sulk right now. For the sake of his sister's mental health, Tatsuya felt that there was a need to set aside his personal unhappy mood for the moment.

Currently, he was already wearing the uniform pants and full vest, so the only thing left was for him to put on the coat. Tatsuya could only helplessly pick up the sleeve of the suit.

Minami stepped forward as if to assist Tatsuya with the sleeves, but was immediately blocked when Miyuki moved at the same instant. Without feeling put out, Minami returned to her original position.

His sister pressed a hand to the coat while Tatsuya turned around. Miyuki helped Tatsuya into the sleeves of the long suit before working from her brother's back to the shoulders, fixing the contours.

Next to Tatsuya, who had once again turned to face the mirror, Miyuki drank in his figure with a hand laid against her dazed face as warm gasps of air exhaled from her mouth.

The style and colors were exactly the same as the school uniform for male students at First High. However, there were three particular details that were different from before.

On Tatsuya's new school uniform, an emblem of eight petals forming a gear was embroidered over the left chest and over both shoulders. A new design, the emblem was the exact same size as the eight petal flower on the Course 1 student uniforms and also sewn at the ends of both sleeves.

"Onii-sama, this fits you perfectly……"

Though Tatsuya himself still felt a little out of sorts with the new uniform, this new design was absolutely integral for allowing Miyuki to vent the aggravation of watching her older brother spend the entire previous year without an emblem to his chest.

That gear was the symbol of the new Magic Engineering Department established this year. In the previous year, Tatsuya had accumulated accomplishments that were undeniable to both within and without. If his "substitute" status was maintained, the school believed that would have a detrimental effect on the student's image. In the end, the new Magic Engineering Department was established, or Magitech for short.

Of course, the school system wasn't being changed for Tatsuya alone. Setting aside the reason behind all this for the moment, there was no way the newly created classes could only accept one student.

In regards to this, a fundamental adjustment was made to First High's class structure.

The number of new students accepted into Course 1 and 2 remained unchanged at 100 students each.

What changed was the procedure involved when these students advanced to Year 2. The new Year 2 students had the option to choose between the original Magic Study or Magic Engineering classes. Students who chose to continue with the original would still be divided into 4 classes of Course 1 students and 3 classes of Course 2 students. On the other hand, students who volunteered for the Magic Engineering Department and passed the

examination in March would join the newly established Magic Engineering class with an emphasis on magic engineering in the curriculum.

In the name of devising a new experimental class, First High accepted new faculty dispatched from the university. Though they only began with one class, if the results were positive, the plan was to grant new students who had just enrolled the same option of choosing between the normal Magic Study or Magic Engineering.

Furthermore, as a side effect of the Magitech class's establishment, Course 2 students were granted access to this class to supplement the deficiency of Course 1 students transferring into that department. This was done based on the practical skills ranking among the Course 2 students. Among Tatsuya's friends, Mikihiko would be transferred to Course 1 at the start of this year.

Regardless of how they tried to embellish the truth, the fact that the Magic Engineering Department was created because of Tatsuya was blatantly obvious to those who were aware of the details.

Hence there was a reason, and it was therefore natural, for Miyuki to be overjoyed with her brother's "dashing figure".

Maybe because she was satisfied after her brother struck a series of poses, Miyuki finally relented and let Tatsuya off the hook. Though he got the impression that he was being treated like a dress up doll, Tatsuya consoled himself with the words "Miyuki is a girl after all". (Speaking of which, Minami's new student fashion show had been performed three days ago.)

"Onii-sama, Minami-chan, come have tea."

Miyuki delightedly proposed to her housemates as she seemed to bounce off to the kitchen. Even the scene of Minami's seemingly gloomy look at her retreating back was now within the norm. In Tatsuya's eyes, maybe because of her age – perhaps her youth would be a better way of putting it – and the fact that she had been firmly imbued with a sense of diligent professionalism, Minami was very proud of her duties as a maid (a somewhat rude way of looking at it). For Minami, stealing her task of preparing the tea was something that impacted the meaning of her existence. However, when it came to the importance of "taking care of Tatsuya", Miyuki would second that to no one. Which is why during the first

5 days after Minami came to this house, the two of them were outwardly pleasant towards one another, but were actually engaged in a furious tug of war. If Tatsuya was someone with a weak constitution, he would surely have succumbed to an ulcer. Fortunately (?), his physical flesh as well as his nerves and innards were as strong as steel.

With both sides putting their raison d'etre on the line, the result of this quiet war ended in a dubious compromise between Miyuki and Minami.

First, Minami was responsible for cleaning and washing clothes.

Second, Minami was responsible for cleaning up after meals and tea.

Third, when Tatsuya was present, Miyuki would prepare meals. Minami could do so if Tatsuya was not around.

Fourth, when Tatsuya was present, Miyuki would prepare tea. Minami could do so if Tatsuya was not around.

Fifth, Tatsuya's wardrobe was Miyuki's domain. Minami would assist with Miyuki's clothes and garb.

The reason this was dubious was because even now, whenever Miyuki or Minami detected that the other side had left an opening, they would immediately seize the opportunity. Still, in Tatsuya's eyes, the two of them seemed to be on a relatively friendly footing.

On the surface, Tatsuya and Minami's relationship appeared to be cordial. –Then again, a soon to be 17-year old youth and a 15-year old girl becoming the best of friends in two weeks was probably a problem in and of its own right. Tatsuya thought as if all this did not affect him in the slightest.

Though this didn't constitute estrangement, it was true that Tatsuya was of the mind to keep Minami at a distance. Regardless of the slightly downward drooping eyes at the corner, the dark brown, wavy hairstyle, willowy brows, or the dimples that appeared on the sides of her face when she smiled – Minami was too similar to Honami.

Sakurai Honami. The woman who served as his dead mother's guardian. Four years ago, she had died at Okinawa while protecting Tatsuya.

Like Honami, Minami was born from an unfertilized egg that came from the same "mother" and had also undergone genetic modification before applying sperm from the same "father" to "manufacture" a genetically modified human being whose magical genes had been strengthened – a modified body. Though they weren't "twins", they were close enough to be "sisters". The family tree would list her as a cousin, so it was only natural for Minami's facial structure to be similar to Honami.

Of course, that extent of the theory was known to Tatsuya. Still, that sort of comprehension was insufficient to explain anything or comfort anyone. The thing that created the estrangement (or something akin to that) was not her appearance, but that her appearance triggered Tatsuya's memories of the dead.

To the siblings, Honami was someone who was practically family. Upon further contemplation, she was a girl who might have been an older sister. Whenever she was reminded of her, Miyuki was always filled with melancholy and gloomy remembrance. However, Tatsuya's recollection contained more bitter regret than Miyuki. For Tatsuya, even the reminder that she was practically family only compounded the bitter aftertaste. It wasn't something he couldn't swallow, but he still couldn't help but frown at the bitterness of it all.

—Too powerless—

The struggles Tatsuya bore towards the regret involving Honami could be summed up in that one phrase.

The cause of Honami's death was physical weakening. If Tatsuya had not met the Great Asian Alliance's fleet attacking Okinawa, then at least she wouldn't have died there. The undeniable truth of the matter was that in order to protect Tatsuya, Honami had forced herself to use large scale magic that burned through all of her remaining life force.

However, Tatsuya didn't regret the decision he made at the time. He didn't believe that choosing to meet the enemy assault was the incorrect decision. Although his actions at the time were not the product of careful planning and were the result of impetuousness, there was a much higher probability of the situation worsening if he had not chosen to annihilate the Great Asian Alliance fleet. This was not just Tatsuya's opinion, but the consensus of the research labs in the University of Defense after running multiple simulations.

His regret came from the fact that Honami's power was even necessary.

Currently, Tatsuya did not need to employ any extra effort when wielding Material Burst. Now that he had learned to set up "Decomposition" as an area of effect magic, Tatsuya no longer needed to rely on Honami's power to intercept the shots fired from the enemy fleet.

He was just that powerless at that time.

Triggered by Minami's appearance, Tatsuya was reminded of his powerless self.

"Onii-sama?"

"Ah, I'm on my way."

Tatsuya fell into a reverie for less than 3 seconds. Miyuki didn't call out to him because they were pressed for time, but rather because of the subtle change of atmosphere that Tatsuya produced.

He replied back to Miyuki's call and began walking forward.

Immediately behind him, it seemed perfectly natural for Minami to wait for Tatsuya to make the first move.

Since there were literally only the siblings in the house, the sudden addition of another housemate required purchasing quite a few replacement items. The dining table was one such item. The table was one size larger than before and the surface design was now composed of glass that was able to withstand high temperatures. That said, the table was actually sturdier now and was proof against breakage unless a two-handed hammer was used against it. Considering its moisture resistance and ease of cleaning, practicality was also a plus. –In comparison, the price was also significantly higher. Tatsuya took a seat at the table while Miyuki sat across from him, with Minami sitting to Miyuki's side.

For some reason, Miyuki still wore an apron. By her side, Minami remained silent though she also wore an apron. Sitting across from two young girls both wearing aprons was certainly an interesting scene, Tatsuya thought.

However, though they were both wearing aprons, the style differed drastically between the two.

Minami wore a full body, long-sleeved frock with a high collar. The thick, sturdy apron practically covered every inch of her body from the front and was clearly designed with practicality first in mind. Even though this wasn't the "official" European maid uniform from the 19th century, this plainly evoked that impression.

Compared with that, Miyuki wore a mini-gown which daringly revealed the thighs even though it was still early spring. The apron was also the type with thin straps – how many aprons did she have squirreled away – and left the curves from the chest to the collarbone on full display. Naturally, everything below the edge of the apron that was 10 cm above the knees was also uncovered. Through the surface of the transparent glass table, the depths of her thighs could be seen along her knees that were side by side.

Was this little sister of his tempting – teasing him?

Stop, he lost if he started paying heed.

Thankfully, once he made up his mind, he was truly able to put it from his mind. In this regard, he should express thanks to his mother and aunt, Tatsuya thought. –Though perhaps Miyuki bore the opposite opinion.

Still, both sides kept their cards close to their chest as the siblings both raised their coffee mugs and sampled the snacks.

"—There's only 3 days until student orientation. Minami-chan, are you looking forward to it?"

This was something that had never happened before while the two of them were living alone. Once ignored by Tatsuya, Miyuki feigned obliviousness and changed the topic to Minami.

"Indeed, Miyuki-neesama. I am looking forward to it."

To the other side, it was possible that Minami failed to pick up on Miyuki's thoughts or maybe she had no other recourse even if she noticed. At any rate, Minami replied back in a frank manner.

"I'll have to arrive at school ahead of time that day with Miyuki. Minami, do you mind?"

"That's no problem, Tatsuya-niisama. Please allow me to accompany you."

As a side note, "Miyuki-neesama" and "Tatsuya-niisama" were terms that Tatsuya had proposed and Miyuki had given the order to use.

The inherent characteristic of modern public transportation, the train cabin, would usually prevent strangers from sharing the cabin. Nor was there any way to share one halfway through the journey. People who wished to board the same train cabin would either have to live under the same roof or be neighbors, and at the very least needed to rendezvous at the train station.

On the other hand, based on the demands of her role as a bodyguard, Minami could only choose to board the ride that Miyuki took to school. Yet, riding along in the same cabin with a complete stranger would surely be jarring and bring about unnecessary suspicion.

To that end, the excuse they came up with was "Minami is a cousin from the siblings' mother's side". That itself was entailed in instructions from the Yotsuba Family's main house and the siblings' census information had been counterfeited in the first place. There would be nothing out of the ordinary even if a cousin with no blood relationship suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

The problem was Minami's choice of words, such as "Miyuki-sama" and "Tatsuya-sama".

In the current age, besides an exclusive minority, there were practically no female high school students who referred to upperclassmen who were older than themselves by one year with "~sama". That minority typically belonged to the upper echelons of society, servants working for wealthier families, or girls who belonged in a serving caste to a powerful family. From the perspective of Magicians, this was a phrase only found in the Ten Master Clans or families of similar stature. Although phrases like "Onii-sama" and "Onee-sama" were already outrageous enough, they were relatively normal when compared to "~sama".

Miyuki and Tatsuya actually hoped that she would refer to them as "Miyuki" and "Tatsuya", but Minami adamantly refused. Minami even recoiled from referring to them as "Onee-san" and "Onii-san". Still, she understood the necessity of concealing their identity, and finally compromised with "Miyuki-neesama" and "Tatsuya-niisama".

The siblings who had previously lived alone now had to welcome an unexpected addition to their midst, and seemed to be getting along quite well so far.

During afternoon tea, the subject naturally turned to the student orientation 3 days down the road.

"This year's student representative is a boy…… It's been 4 years, hasn't it?"

"Five years, Onii-sama. The Student Council President before Saegusa-senpai was also a girl."

The topic of the siblings' conversation was regarding this year's new student representative, who also happened to have the top score on the entrance examination. Just as the two said, it had been a long time since First High saw a male student as the new student representative.

"Since Saegusa-senpai's sisters also applied, I thought that this year's representative would be a girl for sure."

"Indeed…… Furthermore, if Minami-chan were a little more serious during the entrance examination, then she would be the new student representative."

"No, that's hardly the case……"

Hearing Miyuki's words with a hint of teasing, Minami wore a stiff expression as she shook her head. The main house had ordered her to remain inconspicuous, so it was true that she held back on Magic Power. Even so, Tatsuya believed that if she truly tried her best during the exam, there was a high probability that she could have taken the top spot, but Minami's passivity seemed to render her unable to treat this subject lightly.

Just as they were about to descend into an awkward silence, Tatsuya decided to change the subject.

"I believe his name is Shippou Takuma. By Shippou, I don't suppose it would refer to that 'Shippou'?"

Miyuki wasn't intentionally putting Minami in a hard spot. She immediately followed her brother's example.

"Exactly, he is the eldest scion of the 'Shippou' Family from the 18 Families."

A map of the authorities among magical families floated into Tatsuya's head and crossed with Miyuki's memories of the files gleaned from the Student Council records to reach a consensus.

"Never thought that Saegusa and Shippou would be in the same year. I wonder if this was a coincidence or predestined fate…… Hopefully they won't do anything to cause trouble."

As if getting a foreboding premonition, Tatsuya slightly crinkled his eyebrows.

"I do wonder if they were to create a ruckus, would that help us keep our identities secret?"

"That may also be true."

What Miyuki was referring to was that the disturbance caused by the friction between the eldest son of the Shippou Family and the Saegusa twins might help draw the school's attention, which would then take away anyone snooping around regarding Minami's link to the siblings, or at the very least decrease it somewhat.

These words worked well in theory, but Tatsuya could feel a headache coming on when he thought about who had to take care of the ensuing chaos.

"Speaking of which, in regards to the family party tonight……"

The cups and tray were all empty, so it was about time to clean up. Just as Minami was about to stand, Tatsuya raised a hand to stop her before suddenly changing the subject.

"I believe that Minami should still attend."

Tatsuya and Miyuki had been invited to the Kitayama (Shizuku's family) family gathering this evening. Originally, Minami was not supposed to stay on guard at the house, but follow them to the Kitayama mansion and stay on station in the servants' waiting area, but now that plan was subject to change, Tatsuya elaborated.

"If that's an order, I will obey."

Minami's reply was precisely how a servant should respond. However, her lacking expression seemed to intentionally convey: "I'm really not interested". While Minami was an introverted young girl, that did not mean she was completely without facial expression, thus when compared to individuals who intentionally revealed exaggerated expressions like Mayumi or Erika, she was actually an easier person to read. –Of course, that required Tatsuya's level of observation skills.

Forcing other people into obedience was not Tatsuya's nature, nor did he take delight in ordering her to do things that she disliked. "Since this is an order, I will obey" was not an answer that he wanted. If that's how the other side viewed it, he was more inclined to say "then forget it", but once he remembered his earlier words, he ultimately opted against saying that aloud.

"In that case, sorry for putting this on you this time."

Since he felt the need to put on this show to help increase the persuasiveness of the lie that she was a cousin from their mother's side, he was not going to back down even though he heard something he disliked.

"Then let's hurry and pick a dress. I will help Minami-chan, and we're almost out of time."

Miyuki clapped her hands together and said this to help break the tension, though she was also probably taking into account her brother's unexpressed feelings.

And definitely not because she wanted to see Minami's wavering expression. Probably.

Chapter 2

Despite being called a "family gathering", this was still sponsored by the financial giant Kitagata Ushio – "Kitagata Ushio" was the industry name Shizuku's father used – thus the party was fairly bustling with activity and excitement.

Still, no one had the impression that the event was chaotic or unorganized, in spite of the extravagant number of people present.

"A grand area as expected……"

Kitayama mansion might be the only place wide enough to serve as the gathering area and prompt that undisguised admiration from Tatsuya.

Still, his sentiment was not echoed by his compatriots. Miyuki merely smiled as she went along with her brother's words. To the side, Minami still wore a befuddled expression. In this regard, Tatsuya had more opportunities in the military and at the research labs to interact with "plebeians", so when compared with the heir (candidate) to the Yotsuba Family, Miyuki, and the servant who had more or less grown up in the Yotsuba Family main house, Minami – what appealed to Tatsuya's feelings was different than what impacted his sisters based on their varying backgrounds.

The purpose of today's festivities was to congratulate Shizuku on her return to the country after her short study abroad session in the USNA as well as her advancement to Year 2.

Though she had already returned 2 weeks ago, the reason why this party was delayed so long was because she was preoccupied with greeting everyone.

While Shizuku was one of the finest students at the National Magic University Affiliated First High and a budding Magician of talent in her own right, her identity also entailed being a daughter of a major financial giant. From society's perspective, her position as the daughter of the CEO came first. Her future as an aspiring Magician (in the end) belonged to her alone, whereas her position as the CEO's daughter carried the responsibilities towards family, employees, stockholders, and clients.

Owing to these layered reasons, her personal (?) party was pushed back until the day before the new semester began.

The Kitayama Family of five people consisted of Shizuku, her parents, a grandmother, and her younger brother. Still, Shizuku's father also had an additional 5 brothers and sisters (this sort of family size was hardly odd given that they were wealthy even among the wealthy), and given that Shizuku's father married late, most of her relatives were older than her. More than half of them had already married and had arrived with their family members in tow, while the single ones brought their fiancé or engaged partners. Hence this family party boasted such enormous attendance. ……At least, that was how Shizuku's mother explained it to Tatsuya.

"Ushio-kun's family is an old industrial family that has lasted from the previous century to this age. A lot of people can't be simply dismissed so easily."

While cautiously playing along with the lady's words, Tatsuya had lost count of the number of times he had sighed mentally. For some unfathomable purpose as to why she zeroed in on him, Lady Kitayama, once famous throughout the magical world for her Oscillation-Type Magic as the A-ranked Magician, Kitayama Benio, or Naruse Benio prior to her marriage, seized upon him as her conversation partner the moment Tatsuya exchanged greetings with Shizuku. Speaking of which, Miyuki and Minami had already fled to the sides of Shizuku and Honoka.

"Even so, it's still hard to put on a welcoming face to someone who was shameless enough to drag a stranger in here. Even with the company at stake, Ushio-kun shouldn't pamper his family so much."

Tatsuya mentally concurred. –Shizuku's mother appeared to be someone with a forked tongue.

Of course, someone who always employed a forked tongue would not be able to survive in the real world regardless of her status as the CEO's wife (the virtual world was another story altogether), so she probably selected the proper time and place as well as the appropriate conversation partner. However, as to why that conversation partner happened to be he whom she most likely met for the first time currently remained beyond Tatsuya's grasp no matter how he wracked his brain.

This was not the first time Tatsuya encountered Benio. When Shizuku was sending along the information she gathered from America, he and Miyuki

had met Benio that day, but that was only for an instant. He didn't recall doing anything that would prompt her to strike up a conversation with him.

(However, "Ushio-kun", eh…… Is it really OK to use that name with all of these people of standing here?)

Starting to get a little fed up with Benio's complaints, Tatsuya mentally retorted while indulging in a little escapism from reality.

Tatsuya knew the ages of Shizuku's parents. Naturally, there was no need to go into detail regarding Shizuku's father and since her mother was quite famous in the modern era, gathering their Personal Data didn't require too much effort (that being said, with the heavy security surrounding Personal Data in this day and age, a typical individual would be unable to do this). Adding a "-kun" appellation to her husband's name was not because Lady Kitayama was older. Unlike Ushio, who appeared younger than his age, Benio's age and appearance were of an accord, so their appearances put them roughly at the same age while in reality, Ushio was older than Benio by 9 years.

(Must be love, then.)

There were qualms to even imagine applying the words "pampered" or "spoiled" to a friend's relatives.

Maybe she was satisfied with venting all of her internal displeasure, and the ugly glint in Benio's eyes faded. However, in return, she leveled a calculating gaze at Tatsuya. This time it wasn't directed towards a "stranger" who had been brought by a relative as a guest, but towards Tatsuya instead.

Though his face was relaxed, Tatsuya felt just as out of place as anyone else would. While he hoped to rendezvous with Miyuki's group as soon as possible, Benio didn't seem ready to let him go.

"Speaking of which....."

Benio spoke up even before Tatsuya could excuse himself. Though he was holding back because she was the mother of one of his peers, this was still a contemptible mistake on Tatsuya's part. –Not that this was anything profound, but Tatsuya was just out of sorts.

"So, are you Honoka's crush?"

Despite this coming out of nowhere, Tatsuya immediately picked up on the context. Hindsight was 20/20, but if he could have predicted this then he could have prepared a suitable response.

"Setting aside that term for the moment, I am indeed that person."

To be honest, the name "crush" was something Tatsuya had to resist answering "that's true". Though this was just pointless sophistry at this point, it was not something Tatsuya could so easily concede.

"So you aren't easily flustered. How dependable."

Somehow, this twisted point appeared to be Benio giving him high marks. Otherwise, he was receiving high marks because he wasn't muddling through the issue. The smile Benio wore towards Tatsuya turned from summarily polite to something a little friendlier.

"But why didn't you accept?"

Friendlier, but still with an element of teasing.

"Though she's not on par with your sister, isn't Honoka-chan still adorable?"

She must have an interest in watching small animals scurry around in a cage while feeling kinship to them. After successfully passing the first test, Tatsuya's eyes took on a glint that hoped she was wasting her time.

"I do think she's cute. Not just her features but her personality as well."

Tatsuya's attitude was more or less just playing along for show. Without being aware of what he was looking for, he was carefully scrutinizing Benio for the purpose behind these words without letting a single detail slip by.

"Aha…… If that's how it is, then this becomes even more confusing. Plainly, facial appearance, body and personality are all excellent, but you still rejected her confession."

Tatsuya failed to recall that he mentioned Honoka's body, but this must be what a slip of the tongue was like. Tatsuya planned on ignoring her regardless of what she said, but that appeared to be unnecessary.

Even faster than him, Benio dropped an explosive declaration.

"Also, Honoka-chan already helped you. She will serve you faithfully."

If this wasn't an explosive declaration then nothing else could qualify. Even for teasing on her daughter's peers, this was going too far. From one Magician to another, this was neither proper nor prudent.

An ordinary magic high school student would be completely unable to understand what Benio was referring to.

If they could understand the meaning behind her words, then the natural sensibilities that came along with a 16 to 17 year-old young man should have been unable to hide his exhilaration.

However, Tatsuya only gazed back at Benio's face with nary an expression on his face.

Benio's smile failed to crumble, as expected of the wife of a major financier.

"……I see. So you are able to put on such an expression even knowing that."

However, she appeared to be unable to hide the slight stiffness in her voice.

"I didn't plan on feigning obliviousness."

Tatsuya's voice was definitely something that could not be described as friendly. No matter what her intent was, Benio's earlier words belonged to a category that could not be voiced aloud. Despite the fact that she was the mother of one of his friends, Tatsuya did not believe it was necessary to converse with her in a friendly manner.

"Is that so…… Knowing the Elements' power and its potential value, that's why you refused and took a hands off attitude."

Honoka's bloodline – the Elements. Honoka was the descendant of Magicians developed to revitalize traditional magic that came even before the 4 Great Systems and 8 Major Types of modern magic. To those who held positions of colossal power, that bloodline was of incredible value. Tatsuya was well aware of this point, which was the same point that Benio was referring to.

At this moment, the decorous smile on Benio's face vanished. Her stiff voice changed to a chilly one.

"Don't tell me, this was all part of your plan?"

Benio failed to clarify what was planned out, but Tatsuya accurately captured the gist of the meaning behind her words just as he correctly read the reprimand and slander entailed within.

"I never planned on using Honoka like that."

That being said, Tatsuya was not cowed. Nor did he attempt to rebut the injurious words directed at him.

"Yet, you still allowed her to accompany you when you beat back the vampires."

Benio might have felt that Tatsuya was playing dumb. Frustration was beginning to surface in her words.

"There was no reason to deny her then."

Tatsuya knew very well the cause behind Benio's alteration. Even if he missed out on the positive points directed towards him, there was no way he could miss enmity. That was simply the way he had been forged. On the other hand, he had also trained to never waver even in the face of ferocious enmity and malice.

Against Tatsuya, who showed no inclination of becoming enraged no matter what sort of provocation was given, Benio changed the conversation's direction.

"……Honoka is like a sister to Shizuku. We also see that child like she's one of our own. In addition, Shizuku has taken a fancy to you. The trust Shizuku bears towards you surpasses the realm between ordinary friends."

The gaze Tatsuya sent back to Benio inquired her as to the point of all this.

In Tatsuya's mind, the concern that "this was Shizuku's mother" had long since been extinguished.

"Which is why I conducted an investigation on you, Shiba Tatsuya-kun."

Benio watched Tatsuya with a challenging glint in her eyes.

"Though that would hardly be pleasant, I can understand."

In response, Tatsuya received it with a magnanimous look.

"Who the devil are you? With Kitayama's…… The information network from the 'Corporate Alliance' couldn't even find your Personal Data!"

"That must have been a mistake. After all, I can't attend high school without Personal Data."

Tatsuya's answer made perfect sense. However, Benio felt that this was the rub.

"Please don't underestimate adults. It is true that your PD has the lowest level of information, interlaced with extra information that complicated the picture and a few negative reviews, so it wasn't overly perfect. If I had not heard the things that child has said about you, I would have found nothing suspicious."

"Is there something suspicious?"

The tone Tatsuya used with his riposte was as lifeless as a machine. His entire attitude practically screamed that he had already seen through the fact that Benio had no concrete information on her hands.

"No, there's nothing. And that's why it's so odd."

Tatsuya silently watched Shizuku's mother as she kept glaring at him while chasing her own tail around. There was nothing to say. Those were Tatsuya's honest feelings on the matter. The only thing he could think of while escaping from reality was that "she's unlike her daughter in that she's hot-blooded".

"Hearing that child talk, you are someone with incredible prowess, no, practically divine abilities and talent. After this face-to-face conversation, my impression of you has only grown even further along the 'atypical' direction. Yet, how can your Personal Data be so 'mundane'?"

Benio's words were both the truth and mere speculation. Since it was mere speculation, there was no reason to admit to anything.

"Personal Data is just simply information. The actual person cannot be as simple as that."

Personal Data was the mask created to allow other people to identify him. Whether this mask was close to the truth or not, so long as the fact "it was close to the truth but not" remained hidden, the mask would continue to serve as his existence to the outside world.

"……So you are saying that it is only natural for impressions to differ, is that right?"

"That is who I am. If you ask my name and experiences, then it's just as recorded in my Personal Data. In terms of impressions, it is just as you have seen. Beyond that, there is nothing more I have to say on the matter."

On some level, those were Tatsuya's honest thoughts on the matter. –That is who I am. He was someone who wielded incredibly destructive power on the scale of nuclear weapons and may very well one day shatter the world. So "what" was he? This was the question that he often posed to himself without any suitable answer.

However, Benio was unable to accept that answer.

"Are you trying to play dumb……!?"

Though she tried to curb her volume, that tone of hers was harsh enough already.

With a few exceptions, people who tread through the upper strata of society were able to deftly capture when someone of an equal or higher social standing revealed emotional fluctuations. The sight of the host's wife fighting with one of the guests was starting to garner attention from the other participants.

"Benio. Settle down a little."

Although this was called a family gathering, there was no way that only family members were in attendance. She definitely wouldn't want someone else witnessing that scene of hers, which was why it was only natural for Kitayama Ushio to quickly come over and arbitrate.

"Shiba-kun, I apologize for my wife's display."

"Hardly, I believe I am the one who should be apologizing for my insolent words. After all, I am an immature member of the younger generation, so I would be immensely grateful if you could pardon my behavior."

At Ushio bowing his head and apologizing, Tatsuya also returned the greeting and offered his apologies. Yet, his words were still quite haughty.

Fortunately, Ushio didn't mind Tatsuya's rather removed words. There was no sense of renewed anxiety and, just as the tide receded, his eyes drifted from Benio and Tatsuya.

"If appropriate, allow me to excuse myself."

Tatsuya likely believed this to be a good opportunity, hence his words were directed at Ushio instead of Benio.

"Ah, that's true. I believe my daughter would like to speak with you."

Ushio felt that Benio also needed some time to cool down. Tatsuya bowed before walking off in the direction of Shizuku's group while Ushio pressed Benio's back as they gravitated towards the chairs by the wall.

"Tatsuya-kun, I'm sorry."

Upon approaching to a distance where they no longer needed to shout to hear one another, Shizuku beat Tatsuya to the punch and apologized first while bowing her head.

After Shizuku raised her head, a barely perceptible hint of utter embarrassment was tucked within her usual stoic expression. After all, she had invited one of her classmates to her party only to have her own mother trouble them (in Shizuku's eyes). Even someone other than Shizuku would be downright embarrassed.

"Nothing of the sort, I understand where your mother is coming from. If a man appeared out of nowhere and approached your own daughter, some concern is only to be expected. I thought nothing of it, so Shizuku, please don't be concerned."

"……Hm, sorry again."

The lack of any more refutation was not because she wanted to change her mood (though there were some elements of that as well), but because falling silent was her nature. Though she plainly wanted to apologize even more, that was the only phrase she could muster. That feeling was multiplied against her sense of embarrassment, causing her current awkward expression.

In the nick of time, Tatsuya realized that he was about to rub Shizuku on the head. This was blatantly not his responsibility, but because that overly depressed expression overlapped with a look Miyuki occasionally wore, Tatsuya was about to fall back on "rubbing her on the head" as a reflex.

He was far too relaxed, Tatsuya chuckled wryly to himself as he tucked that thought deeply away before shaking his head and laughing lightly as if to signify "let's end this here".

Shizuku, Honoka, Minami, and Miyuki. In the circle of these girls in their glamorous dresses, there stood a young boy in a suit in the middle. Normally, a person in his position would be intensely nervous, but Tatsuya didn't detect that feeling from the boy. Honoka was fervently trying to engage Minami in conversation while Shizuku was interjecting every so often to prevent her from becoming overly excited. With Miyuki's assistance at her side, Minami was tentatively replying back. Watching them all, Tatsuya only kept a cursory ear open to this particular conversation arrangement. At this time, he suddenly heard a voice call out to him from behind and turned around.

"Excuse me, you are Shiba Tatsuya Onii-san, correct?"

This young boy appeared to be under the impression that Tatsuya didn't hear him clearly. Tatsuya responded in the affirmative after the boy repeated his question.

The boy probably hadn't started middle school yet. Faced with a petite young boy with an adolescent air, Tatsuya had no need to inquire his name.

"Wataru."

The young boy's name burst from Shizuku's mouth.

"Onee-chan. Sorry, did I interrupt you all?"

Yet, the boy's identity had to be confirmed by his own lips.

"No. Still, be sure to greet them."

Taciturn as she was, Shizuku's words may sound cold on the surface, but the gaze she sent towards her younger brother was quite gentle.

Fully understanding her words, the young boy named Wataru tried his best to present a diligent expression – an expression as if he was "putting on a strong front" that was simply adorable – and politely bowed according to his sister's instructions.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Kitayama Wataru. I will be a sixth grader this year."

Wataru had turned his body and face towards Tatsuya in order to introduce himself. Since he was already acquainted with Honoka, there was no need to make any introductions. However, he didn't spare Miyuki a single glance – he seemed to be avoiding her (so as to not be overwhelmed). After Tatsuya exchanged greetings, he slightly averted his eyes when Miyuki replied, clenched his teeth and tightened his whole body, which only solidified that impression.

Since this plainly wasn't because he disliked or was ignoring her, Miyuki only considered Wataru's attitude to be very cute. Still, his indecorous behavior towards her "mistress" seemed to rouse some ill will on Minami's part.

"I am very pleased to meet you, Wataru-san. My name is Sakurai Minami. I am Tatsuya-niisama and Miyuki-neesama's cousin. Please take care of me in the future."

Minami's greeting was impeccable, but that dutiful smile on her face seemed to lack sincerity. Though this didn't constitute artificial fawning, it was difficult to hide that she was just observing decorum.

Honoka was the one who stepped up to dispel the awkward atmosphere.

"Wataru-kun, didn't you want to ask Tatsuya Onii-san something?"

Still, she wasn't forcibly changing the subject here. Based on Wataru's earlier behavior towards Tatsuya, he did seem like he had a question to ask.

"Ah, you're right."

Wataru's attention immediately turned towards Honoka. This was not because he was perceptive, but simply how children were.

"Shiba-san."

There were two people with the name "Shiba" here, but everyone here knew who Wataru wanted to speak with, so no one interrupted him intentionally – including Minami.

"There's something I want to ask you."

Faced with an anxious Wataru who finally worked up the courage to speak,

"Sure. So long as I can answer it, of course."

Tatsuya used an easily approachable tone to reply.

"I wanted to know, uh, can someone who can't use magic become a engineer?"

The question itself was nothing surprising, but from the mouth of the son from the Kitayama Family, this became odd. Currently, both Shizuku and Honoka wore astonished expressions.

"No. Magic engineers are technicians who use magic techniques for engineering. Technicians who are unable to use magic cannot be called magic engineers."

However, Tatsuya never hesitated and delivered a frank reply.



"Is that so……"

Hearing Tatsuya's clear answer, Wataru's shoulders drooped gloomily. Still, it was too early to throw in the towel.

"Nonetheless, magic engineers are not the only technicians who work in magic engineering."

"Eh?"

Seeing Wataru raise his head to look at him, Tatsuya revealed a steady smile.

His eyes brimming with hope, Wataru hung on his every word.

"Even without magic, you can still learn magic engineering."

Tatsuya was not intentionally putting on a show out of pettiness. Even if he was a "villain", that did not mean "his personality was evil". –At least, that's how he saw it.

"While it is very difficult to do CAD maintenance without getting a feel for magic, you can still make CADs without being able to use magic. This is the same for other products used for magic techniques. As long as you study hard, you will be able to obtain the knowledge and techniques necessary to help your older sister."

"Ah, no, I'm not……"

No matter how he tried to deny it, his inner thoughts were already on full display thanks to the utter embarrassment on his face.

Following that, the gaze he sent towards Tatsuya morphed from one used against strangers (to elementary school students, high school students were adults) to a worshiping one with a respected air.

Unfortunately, adults were unable to adopt the same pure attitude as children.

Watching the siblings who had been completely charmed by Tatsuya from far away, Benio suddenly wanted to sigh.

"What's the matter, Benio?"

Even if Ushio spoke to her out of concern, Benio could only make a face while resisting the urge to sigh, but did not reply. Her gaze only rested on her husband after he spoke for an instant before once more drifting to where the children were talking and laughing.

"Benio, exactly which part of Shiba Tatsuya-kun do you dislike?"

Kitayama Ushio loved his wife, but that did not mean he was a henpecked husband. Rather, a portion of him was afraid of his wife, but their relationship was not one where he could not voice his thoughts.

"……Ushio-kun, you sound like you approve of him."

Benio finally turned her eyes back to her husband.

"I think that he's an accomplished young man. More importantly, he is very talented."

Ushio's reply was very frank; another interpretation would be that he hadn't thought very deeply on the matter.

Benio felt a surge of displeasure on reflex, but didn't muster any hysterical retort.

"……Maybe even a little too talented."

However, hearing her voice with those forcibly suppressed emotions, he knew that her mental state was far from peaceful.

"Furthermore, he knows too much and understands too much. Even among the members of the Ten Master Clans I am affiliated with, not a single one of them makes me watch my step as carefully as he does."

A sigh finally slipped from Benio's lips. Without sighing, there was no way to convey the concerns she felt.

"For Magicians, being superlatively talented is not a sign of happiness. Instead, happiness recedes from them. Thankfully, Shizuku stopped at the ledge of talent, but if she draws too close to an incredibly talented Magician, then she may be drawn into the misfortune that is drawn to those of overwhelming power."

Ushio was unable to tell his wife that "she was overthinking this".

Rather, Ushio laid a hand on his wife's shoulder.

"Even if it is as Benio says and Shiba Tatsuya brings misfortune, is that really his fault? Avoiding him because of an uncertain future that is no fault of his own is something I cannot agree with. If his strength truly brings misfortune and pulls Shizuku into the mix, then all will be well if we remove that misfortune from their lives. After all, I'm not known as a 'financial giant' for no reason. We are family, and I will protect them. You'll see."

Hearing Ushio's strong words, Benio only nodded and didn't reply.

Nevertheless, she seemed far from accepting his words.

Now it was hard to tell if his strength was too great, but it was true that Tatsuya had the tendency to attract trouble, or at least he was that type. Just as Tatsuya was conversing with Shizuku's brother, the seeds of trouble came creeping up on him.

"Shizuku-chan, long time no see."

The person who struck up a conversation with an intimate tone was a young man who looked to be about 25 years of age. Though he gave off a frivolous impression, his attire wasn't bad or mundane at the very least. Shizuku only nodded lightly in greeting. Though their name was currently unknown, given the familiar air about them, he must be an older cousin from Shizuku's family.

However, when Shizuku and Wataru saw the young woman by the side of the man, both of them took on astounded expressions. At first glance, she was of the same age as the young man. Yet regardless of her face or figure, both were far beyond the norm. Her choice of dress and jewelry were impeccable, giving an almost mystifying impression. Based on Shizuku and Wataru's shocked expressions, this beautiful woman was clearly not one of their relatives.

"Ah, I'm going to get married at the end of the year. With her."

The young man felt the eyes of Shizuku and Wataru on him and frantically explained.

"You're engaged? Congratulations."

"Ah, no, she hasn't gotten the engagement ring from me yet."

Shizuku politely offered words of congratulation, to which the young man somewhat awkwardly shook his head.

Seeing him like this, Tatsuya thought "for a member of the Kitayama Family, this one sure is a normal young man". The beautiful woman by the young man's side who seemed to broadcast her existence smiled at Tatsuya after noticing his gaze.

This time it was Tatsuya's turn to become astounded. Immediately detecting the change in Tatsuya, Miyuki sent a questioning look at her brother that seemed to inquire "What's up?". If this progressed further, Miyuki would undoubtedly follow Tatsuya's line of sight and narrow her brows upon seeing who her brother was looking at. Yet, before things advanced to that stage, the beauty turned not to Tatsuya, but to the star of tonight's show, Shizuku, and opened her mouth.

"Well met, Shizuku-san. My name is Sawamura Maki. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

In Tatsuya's mind, this overly simplified self-introduction was not the product of an introverted personality and dislike towards expressing herself, but because others should naturally know who she was without her input.

As if to prove his hypothesis, Honoka asked Maki in a disbelieving voice after being presented behind Shizuku and Wataru.

"Excuse me, Sawamura-san, you wouldn't happen to be the actress, Sawamura Maki? The one who was nominated for Best Actress in the Pacific Movie Awards for her role in 'Currents of Summer'."

"Ah, so you saw that movie?"

Sawamura Maki adopted a graceful smile and answered Honoka's query. –Though traces of glee could be seen within.

"So it is you! I've seen that piece at the movie theater before. It was incredible!"

"Ho ho, thank you very much!"

Tatsuya didn't watch movies, but he had heard of the fame surrounding the film "Currents of Summer". He recalled that this movie was the subject of much debate in the previous summer. Based on Honoka's attitude, it

appeared to be a piece of considerable interest. At least, this was a film which prompted people to go see it in the theaters rather than viewing it on one of the mainstream channels on TV.

With a nomination at an international film festival, this woman must be a famous actress, Tatsuya thought. At this moment, Tatsuya lost all interest in "her". He was originally uninterested in the entertainment business and, from his perspective, there were too many disadvantages to being a famous artist who was the focal point of the media. With apologies to the highly interested Honoka, Tatsuya personally wished for them to quickly leave and seek out other guests.

Alas, reality had other ideas.

"Forgive me if I have the wrong person……"

There was an upward lilt at the end of that phrase, entailing a question. Maki addressed Tatsuya and Miyuki standing in the back.

"You two wouldn't happen to be Shiba Miyuki-san and Shiba Tatsuya-kun, would you?"

Tatsuya and Miyuki were not naïve enough to appear harried. However, though the degree was different, shock still pervaded their minds.

"Indeed we are. Pardon me, but have we met?"

Tatsuya stepped in front of Miyuki, preventing his sister from once more introducing herself. Directly facing Maki, he offered his own question.

Maki's reply confirmed that Tatsuya's memory was correct.

"No, this is the first we have met."

Then how would you know? Faced with Tatsuya's wordless inquiry, Maki easily unveiled the mystery.

"He let me watch the broadcast for the Nine Schools Tournament. He said that Shizuku-san would be competing."

Needless to say, "he" referred to the fiancée by her side.

"I had thought the two of you came straight out of a painting."

Shizuku was currently speaking with Maki's partner. The reason why she lowered her voice to prevent Shizuku from hearing was probably because people would misconstrue her praise for Miyuki as insulting towards Shizuku, Tatsuya reasoned. With the drop in volume, the gap between their faces also decreased. There may have been another intent involved, but Tatsuya was under no obligation to indulge her.

"Really? My sister is another story, but I myself am hardly deserving of such praise."

Taking into consideration the location and person he was speaking with, Tatsuya intentionally used "myself" in the first person. Compared to meeting with Shizuku's parents, Tatsuya held Maki at an even farther length.

Under the guise of decorum, Miyuki remained silent for the exact same reason as her brother. Both the siblings' instincts told them to be wary of Maki.

"How humble of you. I was not the only one who thought highly of you two. My friends all concur as well."

Speaking of which, Maki also listed the names of several actors and directors, but unfortunately for her, Tatsuya hadn't heard of a single one of them.

"Oh, yes! Do you have time next weekend? If you don't mind, I would love to introduce you two to our salon."

Maki invited Tatsuya with a dazzling smile. On one side, she used an innocent expression to express purity while the other half was charming and tempting. As expected of the acting prowess from a famous young actress.

To be honest, Tatsuya's interest was slightly perked. What drew his attention was finding out exactly what this artist who had nothing to do with magic wanted from him. Tatsuya never believed that codswallop about being drawn to someone's looks. The glint in Sawamura Maki's eyes was not something so superficial.

"Though the opportunity is hard to come by, I will have to decline."

Yet, Tatsuya's reply was a refusal. Though his tone was conciliatory, there was no room for misinterpreting the meaning of his words or any chance of changing his mind.

"I see."

In that instant, fury blazed across Maki's pupils, but was immediately extinguished. Again, as expected of the acting prowess from a famous actress.

"Then, your sister…… Would Miyuki-san grace us with her presence?"

This time she sent a generous smile towards Miyuki. She was able to freely wield a smile filled with womanly charms that was completely free of coquettish airs. Maki's acting skills were legitimate indeed.

"Since my older brother has already declined, I couldn't possibly bother you by myself."

In response, Miyuki immediately replied back in the "negative".

Before these responses that left no room to maneuver, astonishment suffused Maki's face. During the time she was unbalanced, Tatsuya slightly inclined his head and Miyuki gracefully bowed before the two of them departed for the dining tables.

Secretly observing their movements, Minami swiftly followed on their heels. Suddenly turning her head, Minami caught Maki sending an ugly look at Tatsuya before hurriedly turning away.

Possibly misinterpreting the glance sent his way by chance, her (self-declared) fiancée returned to her side from his conversation with Shizuku. Maki welcomed him with a wide smile, a smile that contained none of her earlier fury or faltering.

Chapter 3

The antique electric sports car – a replica of the "super sports cars" popular throughout the country between the late 1970s and the 1980s – stopped before the tall apartment constructed in the heart of the city.

"Here will be fine. Thank you for giving me a lift."

Maki opened the wing-shaped door and stepped out from the low, short vehicle that was practically pressed against the ground. She rose dramatically from her seat as if still in front of the cameras, looped around the rear of the engine, poked her head into the driver's seat – that being said, this was actually an automatic steering system that happened to provide a seat – and said this after a glance.

Her lover, Shizuku's cousin, had an unsatisfied expression on his face. However, once Maki stepped closer and stooped to plant a kiss on his face before giving him a dazzling smile, the young man relaxed and started the car.

Although Maki waved goodbye to the antique replica speeding away, once the electric race car turned around the intersection and vanished, the smile immediately faded from her face in favor of a colder expression. The "lover" who could be manipulated with a single smile was expelled from Maki's mind with a sigh as she walked towards the apartment's lobby where the elevators were.

With the exception of incredibly tall buildings like the Yokohama Bay Hotel, there were very few buildings in Japan that exceeded 100 meters in height in the 22nd century. This was especially the case for residential buildings. From the perspective of the efficient usage of national soil, it was preferable to construct a series of ordinary, taller dwellings compared with a single, lone skyscraper. With that philosophy in mind, there was a row of "condominiums" here that stood 80 meters tall and boasted 20 stories. Maki's room was one of them, a corner room on the 20th floor. Through a combination of mirrors and fiber optics, even lower floors had sufficient light, but tenants ultimately preferred higher floors, which was why the top floor commanded the heftiest prices. In order to purchase such an expensive dwelling in the heart of the city, a famous actress early in her career would be hard pressed to do so alone without a sponsor. –That was under the condition that she was just an actress.

"Good work."

Maki said to the two female bodyguards who stood in the hallway, knowing that their mistress had returned. These were no "followers" that typically accompanied those in the entertainment circles, nor were they interns dispatched by the acting company Maki belonged to. These were guards selected by her father.

In television industry, Maki's father was the CEO of a stock company with many media companies under its umbrella. Though they were not on the same level as the Kitayama Family, the Sawamura Family was a member of the upper crust of society with considerable wealth at its disposal.

After returning home, Maki first took a shower before changing into a more relaxing dress and robes and sat on the sofa. It was a casual garb that she wore only at home or during that particular type of photo shots. After fiddling with the controls on the side of the armrest, she ordered the HAR (Home Automation Robot) to prepare a bottle of wine and a glass. The surface of the coffee table dipped, allowing the bottle and glass hidden beneath the floor to pass through, then returned to its normal height. This was a common mechanism in high class apartments. By now, this was worthy of neither surprise nor excitement. Maki removed the cork and held the bottle to pour herself a glass of red wine.

Rather than hurrying to sample the taste, she left the glass before her and savored the smell. She wasn't really planning on drinking alcohol. It wasn't that she was incapable of imbibing alcohol, but nor was she someone who couldn't live without the bottle. This was Maki's ritual to help her loosen her fraught nerves after returning home from the job. On some level, compared to the smell of the liquor, immersing herself in the atmosphere was probably more appropriate.

However, that hardly indicated that she wasn't drinking anything, and by the time half the contents of the glass had disappeared, her bodyguard opened the door to the living room and came in.

"Milady, Shippou-sama is here."

"Takuma? ……Speaking of which, it's almost time for the appointment. He's a little early, but no matter, let him in."

It's not like she was afraid of someone seeing her dressed like this. Without any sign of hesitation on her face, Maki ordered her bodyguard to allow the guest into the living room.

"Understood."

Even after the bodyguard turned and left, she didn't frantically reach for her cosmetics.

She was an actress.

Even if she only wore her underclothes, she was more than capable of playing "herself as others saw her". Against an inexperienced youngster, a slack dress and robe was more than sufficient.

The youth shown into the living room approached with an air of familiarity and plopped himself down in front of Maki without so much as a please. He stood at approximately 170 cm. The young man's build was slightly thin, and though his face was fair, a faint trace of a childish air remained about him as befitting his age. The reason he gave off a haughty impression was likely due to the burning self-assertion that lurked in his pupils.

"Good evening, Maki-san."

Both his tone and actions were guilty of acting "older than his years".

"Welcome, Takuma. You're quite punctual."

Maki plainly didn't pay any mind to Takuma's brave showing. Still, this sort of interaction wasn't enough to lift Takuma's mood. Their relationship had already persisted for a year.

"Anything to drink?"

"No need. Alcohol impairs cognition."

Takuma shook his head at Maki's suggestion. –Though there was no invitation to "drink alcohol", Maki didn't call him out on that.

"Now that you mention it, it's about time you told me. After all, that's the reason you called me here, wasn't it?"

"True. Let's cut right to chase."

Takuma was a little overzealous for Maki's taste, but faced with a youngster who was almost an entire cycle younger than she was, she wasn't going to stick to her own style. For Maki, Takuma was neither a younger lover nor her personal gigolo.

"I made contact with Kitayama Shizuku. Unfortunately, it looks like she has only managed to remember my appearance and name so far."

"……Uninterested in the arts, eh?"

"However, her friend Mitsui Honoka clearly indicated considerable interest, I believe?"

Seeing Takuma make no attempt to hide his disappointed muttering, Maki employed the poise of an actress, no, a superstar as she smiled at him.

"Really?"

Takuma's attitude shifted (far too honestly) immediately and he leaned his torso towards Maki's direction.

"Mitsui Honoka is also one of the elites among the Year 2 students. Pulling her into the fold would be of great help."

"Maybe. In addition, I feel that if her friend Mitsui Honoka joined Takuma's camp, the chance of achieving a breakthrough with Kitayama Shizuku would rise as well."

Maki and Takuma were "allies". For their own personal reasons, they sought Magicians as comrades – or pieces on a board. One of these scenarios involved enticing Magicians within First High with great potential into their camp and becoming friends.

"I think that it would be better to look for companions among your fellow new students first."

"Our goal is realignment in our respective worlds. Creating a party itself is not the goal, just as capturing a leadership position at school is utterly meaningless. Rather, we should be contemplating how to bring people with massive influence like the Kitayama Family over to our side. Maki, didn't you believe in that as well, which is why you approached that boring man who happened to be a relative of the Kitayama Family?"

Interrupting Maki's words, Takuma captured her gaze with a strong look of his own.

"Let's set Mitsui Honoka as the first target. Of course, you will assist me in this matter?"

Maki turned a smile on the childish fervor that burst forth from Takuma.

"Well, that's a given…… But Takuma, you better take heed to call her 'Mitsui-senpai'. If you don't pay attention normally, you might accidentally address her by her full name at an unexpected time and place, don't you think?"

A guilty look suddenly flooded Takuma's face as his eyes wavered.

Wetting her lips with a touch of red wine, Maki wore a languid expression. That was, of course, an act.

"Maki, is something awry?"

Seeing that expression, Takuma furrowed his brows. His question perfectly hit the nail on the head for Maki.

"Something awry…… That's true."

Naturally, all of this was hidden away. Maki only put on an act that "accidentally expressed that on her face" and ended with "since you asked, I will reply".

"As we heard beforehand, Shiba Miyuki appeared at the party with her older brother."

Takuma seemed ignorant of the fact that was an act. There was no way of knowing whether he was incapable of seeing through her masquerade or he simply didn't care about Maki's mindset. He was wholly fixated on her words.

"Dragging those siblings to our side will be very difficult."

"Did something happen?"

"No, we just talked…… But those two appear to have a special relationship with the previous Student Council President."

Maki was completely lying at this point. Maki had been dismissed by Tatsuya and Miyuki without a chance to do any information gathering. However, Takuma had no way of knowing this.

"The previous Student Council President…… Saegusa!"

A spike of enmity erupted from the interaction between Maki's words and Takuma's own. Fueled by animosity, his emotions covered any chance rational logic could detect the falsehood within.

"This is just speculation on my part, but I think the Shiba siblings are already in the Saegusa camp. Taking out the Saegusa Family in one fell swoop will be difficult now. This is especially true for the sister, who has legions of supporters."

The hatred burned fiercely in Takuma's eyes as he bit back in a belligerent tone that sounded stout.

"The more allies you have, the more enemies you will have as well, that's the law of the world. If they're the dogs of the Saegusa Family, then we will throw down against one another sooner or later. Bring it on!"

"The sister is the Student Council Vice President, so I think you better abandon your idea of seizing a foothold in the Student Council."

Maki seemed to implore with her eyes as she watched Takuma, who had leaped to his feet in excitement.

"From what I know, the sister is a serious bro-con and her older brother is detested by many. Wouldn't it be far more beneficial to use that approach?"

Maki made this suggestion to Takuma in a sincere, encouraging tone.

Chapter 4

Even now in the end of 21st Century, Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya remained Japan's three largest cities. Although Osaka once suffered dramatic changes in real estate prices, the price of goods was decreased thanks to the advent of a free-to-use airport and being the first harbor to operate 24 hours a day, allowing the city to regain its status as an industrial hub.

Yet tonight, the location of the incident to come was not Osaka, but Nagoya.

The time was approximately 2300 hours. The location was the paths located near Atsuta Park along the riverbanks of the Horikawa River.

"Speaking of which, choosing this practically deserted place as the site of their secret gathering is pretty much screaming that they have nothing to hide here."

Entirely ignoring the location – in a thicket by the side of the walkways – that was surrounding them, a 15 or 16 year old young girl with long curls and dressed in a gaudy dress that appeared fresh from a lively rock and roll concert, spoke quietly.

"I feel that those words should not be coming from Onee-san who was almost mistaken for a thug at this time and place."

The voice that replied back sounded low for a girl, but still a touch too high for a boy. Maybe it was impossible to detect whether the individual was a young boy or girl based on voice alone. However, the black, sleeveless miniskirt and frock as well as the stockings of the same color were plainly girl's clothing. As a side note, a black, high collared shirt with long sleeves was worn on the inside of the sleeveless frock, so the only visible flesh was the hands and face. The bosom was only slightly elevated and the black hairstyle was cut neatly short. From appearances, this was undoubtedly a young girl. However, based on the age of the first young girl and the title of "older sister", she was either a sister of similar age or they were twins.

"Yami-chan, you're a knucklehead."

Although the young girl who was referred to as "Yami-chan" by her older sister furrowed her brows for an instant in displeasure, there were no other major complaints forthcoming.

"It's precisely because of this outfit that we can be out here like this. At most, people would only think 'Oh, it's a delinquent', right?"

There was a certain persuasiveness to that argument, so Yami had no reply to that. Still, taking into consideration that the mission given to them tonight required a certain degree of movement, clothing that facilitated movement should have been a basic requirement. Now, her older sister was wearing an outfit that hampered her more than anything else, which should not have fulfilled that basic requirement. Still, given that she had chosen a more fluid – owing to certain reasons, a dress was mandatory – set of clothing and yet was still dismissed with a mere "knucklehead", Yami had a hard time putting that down.

No matter what, she had to muster some sort of rebuttal. The young girl wracked her brain, but a report that came through the receiver she wore over one ear put a halt to that pointless exercise.

"Onee-san, our target seems to have arrived."

"Confirmed. Coming by boat is certainly a surprise, and a racing boat to boot. Given how eye-catching they are…… Were they not planning on hiding at all?"

On the other side, the large, thickset eye patch that her sister wore over her left eye appeared to be a HMD (Head Mount Display). She rubbed her hand over the surface of the eye patch while her right eye squeezed shut for a moment before snapping open. It appeared to be a hassle even for the person wearing it. Yami thought "You might as well not wear it" while also coming across a more objective phrase and voiced it aloud.

"I believe that the target isn't trying to obscure themselves. Even if someone saw them, the information would at most be provided to reporters."

"Reporters, eh……"

Hearing her older sister mutter that word in a suspicious manner, Yami intentionally shrugged her shoulders in an ordinary manner.

"Let's leave Yoru Onee-san's theory regarding the media's untrustworthiness for next time."

"Yami-chan…… You've grown quite insolent!"

The small talk stopped there. The young girl's intent was not entirely out of fun and games. Completely heedless of her older sister's satire, she focused her gaze on the racing boat that was approaching shore. The cabin of the sailing boat was not visible from the outside. The boat stopped at the small dock that also served as a stopping point for tour buses. From the boat, two large men disembarked.

A middle-aged man of medium stature who was neither round nor slender greeted the two men. He gave off a shabby impression, but the two young girls were not fooled. Hidden beneath a layer of a business suit, his body had actually been trained through numerous battles. Furthermore, the man's body gave off the smell of gunpowder.

"That's a reporter? Looks more like a mercenary."

"Actually, looks like he has experience being hired as a mercenary. The data should have been forwarded to you just now."

Yoru turned her face aside to avoid the "Didn't you read it?" look sent her way by her younger sister. She had already verified the reporter's appearance. Even if the person in question tried to hide it, they were currently unaware that they were under surveillance. The data image had already identified their target.

"In other words, he was a hardline anti-establishment reporter from the get go."

"Hmph, a model reporter."

"I'll patiently listen to Onee-san's biases after this is concluded."

"Did you say bias……? Yami-chan, you're more than just a little insolent now!"

"OK, OK, it's about to start. Let's start with the boat first. Onee-san, it's all up to you."

The older sister wore an unhappy expression at being so rudely sidelined, but in spite of their youth, they weren't so unprofessional that they would bungle their task because of personal feelings.

"I know, I know."

Although her replying tone was casual, Yoru's expression had grown serious. She unwrapped the leather decoration covering her left forearm and revealed a bracelet-shaped Generalized CAD. Yoru pressed the power button that was slightly removed from the number pad and summoned the Activation Sequence.

"Well then, I'm setting it off, OK?"

Yoru moved behind her sister. Standing in the gap between the trees, she pinpointed the location of the boat.

Following that, Yami's body vanished.

In the next instant, Yami stood on the sailboat's bow.

Mock Teleportation. That was the name Yoru used for this magic. This was a type of magic that removed an object's inertia (including the human body), surrounded it with a cocoon of air, and created an even larger tunnel of vacuum around it to move the object through that tunnel. Since this was a magic with only four processes that utilized Weight-Type, Convergence, Convergence, and Move-Type Magic, it wasn't a very complicated technique. Still, it had its disadvantages, such as scouting out the destination prior to forming the surrounding air currents that buffered the tunnel of vacuum. If someone had the ability to repeatedly leap into the air while using this ability, they might even be able to continuously use this ability to confuse their opponent. However, this technique was fundamentally incompatible with attacking and was more suited for fleeing.

Nevertheless, the Mock Teleportation Yoru employed didn't leave any trail over the river's surface. She even controlled the air currents that buffered the constructed tunnel of vacuum. This proved that the showy young girl actually possessed an extraordinary caliber in magic.

Using her older sister's power to charge straight into the midst of their prey, Yami lightly tapped off the deck and stormed into the cabin interior. There were five men waiting there. Much like the reporter who had once served as a mercenary, their bodies had also undergone training. However, unlike the barbaric impression that the reporter left people with, their eyes carried a decidedly loyal and pure gaze.

"Who's there!?"



The voice rattling off the question sounded a touch stiff. A stiffness that came from the mother tongue being wrenched out of one's mouth but forcibly changed into Japanese. There were many Japanese people in the Americas and Europe, and the number of East Asian individuals who appeared similar to the Japanese was even larger. Personal identification might have to wait until after the arrest, Yami thought.

Under the light, Yami's appearance was simply adorable. She had a pair of large pupils within almond shaped eyes with a finely shaped set of red lips beneath a straight, narrow nose. It was such a young girl who had suddenly burst into a cabin filled with only men. The confusion felt by the men was palpable. Not that Yami had any reason to allow these men to recover their wits, of course.

Yami reached out with her right hand. At this point, the men finally noticed that this young girl wore a shining black set of brass knuckles over her right hand.

Yami's action only served to confuse the men further. Brass knuckles were weapons that increased the force of punches and had little purpose if not within range. Four of the men were actually wondering if this was cosplay of some sort.

"Hey, what's going on!?"

All of a sudden, one of their companions fell forward. It was abundantly clear now to the men that the situation before them was not a joke. One of them crouched over their fallen comrade and shook his body. He was probably oblivious to the fact that he was speaking in English. The other three men no longer had the leisure to worry about such trivialities.

Just before he could verify that the fallen man had lost consciousness, it was the crouching man's turn to let out a shout of pain as if struck before collapsing. Yami's right arm was pointed at the second victim.

"A Magician!?"

By this point, the men had realized the connection between their companion's collapse and Yami's right hand. Wherever the young girl pointed with her right hand, one of their fellows fell to the floor. Between the young girl and themselves stretched a distance that was difficult to cover with arms alone. Nor was there any sign of any object being fired

from the young girl's hands. The only remaining explanation they could think of would be a magical attack.

The man who dropped the question was not anticipating any answer. He was just calling out on reflex.

Yami's hand reached out towards that man and, just like his fellows, the man stretched out on the floor.

"You monster!"

Hatred lacing their words, two guns were aimed at Yami. Shouting alone could be absorbed by the sound barrier that they had deployed ahead of time, but Yami wasn't confident that they could silence gunshots. Given that the guns they pulled out weren't even equipped with silencers, they seriously hadn't planned on covering their tracks.

Still, Yami had no reason to simply wait there to be killed.

One finger pressed a button at the end of the knuckles. The bar she held in hand was the actual CAD itself, whereas the brass knuckles on the outside were just decorations. The Specialized CAD loaded with Yami's specific magic deployed its Activation Sequence.

This was a magic that directly bestowed pain on the human senses. After sustaining pain as if they had been hammered in the abdomen, the men easily lost consciousness.

After putting down resistance within the cabin in record time, Yami also dispatched the three men at the docks in swift succession before removing a transmitter from a bag on her waist to contact support. Yoru walked towards her as the three layers of her dress fluttered in the wind. The eye patch over her left eye was gone now, probably due to her frustration. With her real face revealed, the older sister's appearance was actually rather childish. On the other hand, as cute as Yami's appearance was, it also gave off the same neutral impression that her voice did.

"Yami-chan, have they been identified?"

"We're matching their appearances now, so we should know soon. The people on board were members of the humanist organization active in the USNA. If we brought them back for intensive investigation, might we have a chance at finding out who is pulling their strings?"

"And the reporter?"

"Based on the transmission records left in the terminal, that one appears to be an independent congressman famous for loathing Magicians. What a careless mistake."

"Really…… I feel a little disappointed."

"Yeah. Looks like our intervention wasn't even required."

Compared to her older sister's disappointed smile, the young sister was earnestly complaining.

"Hey, Yami-chan!"

Yet, those words roused a scolding from her older sister.

"How can you use that form of 'our'?"[1]

That being said, it's not like it was directed towards the complaints about the job.

"Uh…… There's no harm in me using 'our' once!"

"Although there are girls who use that form, they are still the minority. Separating yourself from the pack and drawing attention to yourself is a big no-no!"

Though the phrase "And Onee-san has the right to talk?" was stuck in his throat, his older sister's reprimand was undeniable, so Yami could only swallow his retort.

However, Yami's conflict became completely meaningless with the arrival of the stream of countless men in black.

"Young master, we're about ready to move."

The men who looked suspicious under any context directly referred to Yami as "young master".

"You idiot! It's 'milady', not 'young master'! Did you want to waste the young master's painstaking effort in cross dressing!?"

The one who appeared to be the leader of the men furiously struck one of the men in black on the back of the head.

"I'm terribly sorry, young master, no wait, milady."

"You, you, you……"

"Ah?"

"You completely ruined it!"

The beautiful young girl quaking in fury was actually a cross dressing young boy. In a soft voice, he furiously admonished,

"And that's not 'cross dressing', it's a 'disguise'!"

"Yes, yes, it's a perfect disguise. Even in our eyes, there's no way we could have thought that it was Young Master Fumiya."

"What the hell are you doing leaking it all out!"

"Yami, relax."

Yoru, or Kuroba Ayako, warned Yami, or Kuroba Fumiya, as the latter was rapidly losing control of his volume. As a side note, "Yami" was a pseudonym that came from reversing the last two phonetics of the name "Fumiya", whereas "Yoru" was devised from the middle character in "Ayako".

"Still, you guys are all too careless. With that sort of diligence, I wonder how terribly the master will scold all of you."

The men in black all paled in an instant. Fumiya's brain also cooled down. A clear sign of how greatly the fear of the "master" was imprinted in their hearts.

"We should not be staying here. Prepare to retreat."

"Affirmative."

In an organized and efficient manner, the men in black hauled the reporter and foreigners away in large sacks.

"I'm sorry, Onee-san."

Left behind was Fumiya, still standing there as Yami, with his head bowed down in shame.

"Oh well, there was nothing we could do anyways. If I had taken your feelings into account……"

"……I am overjoyed to hear you say that."

Fumiya's shoulders seemed to slump at his sister's reassuring words.

"Just bear with it a little longer. Once you hit puberty, there's no way to disguise yourself as a girl any longer. Though it will be a hassle, we will be forced to come up with another disguise for you."

"Yeah…… You're right……"

Though he was plainly a high school student, there was no sign that he was physically unable to continue pretending to be a girl. Fumiya nodded encouragingly to himself as if trying to avoid facing that fact.

◊ ◊ ◊

On the surface, Zhou Gongjing was the young owner of a popular Chinese restaurant, but he had several other personas on the sly.

One of the more well-known ones was an intermediary who helped transport refugees who were staying in Japan temporarily after fleeing from the totalitarian regime in the Great Asian Alliance to a third country. Not only was he assisting in transportation, he was also providing funding for various resistance movements against the Great Asian Alliance afterwards.

As if to balance the scales, he also served as a spy for the Great Asian Alliance. To be precise, he was the local collaborator for spies. During the Yokohama Incident last October, he had provided assistance to the Great Asian Alliance's operational units.

Even within the Vampire Incident at the dawn of the year, Zhou had provided critical assistance in aiding the Parasites to secretly enter the country.

Superficially, his secret activities appeared downright treacherous as he aided and abetted both Japan and the Great Asian Alliance, but naturally there was a method to the madness. A student of small government, this political view did influence him somewhat, but above all else, Zhou served

as cat's paw to someone else in order to further anti-Magician activities to damage both Japan and the Great Asian Alliance.

It was deep in the night on China Street. In the basement of his restaurant, Zhou Gongjing knelt in a room that no one else had tread in before. The target he bowed to was a large, humanoid doll dressed in Chinese finery woven with countless gold and silver threads while sitting in a chair. This was a Sorcery Booster medium that had been created from a human corpse, with its entrails removed and preservatives applied before directly modifying the brain. Behind the doll, a gigantic transmission device that rivaled the freezer used for the restaurant sat there with a cable coming out that plugged directly into the back of the skull.

"Great One."

Hearing the young man's summons, the corpse that served as the medium opened its eye lids. From within the empty sockets, a will-o-the-wisp was lit.

"Gongjing, how go the preparations?"

The doll let out a rattling voice. Given the obvious lack of any lung movement, the voice was created from Ancient Magic that came from mainland China, Zombification. Using the same technique found in CADs to transform psion signals into electronic ones, the corpse was turned into a communication device that could not be wiretapped.

"Alas, the humanists gathered from America have all been apprehended with the reporter."

"So the plan to devise sympathetic witnesses has failed."

Completely the opposite of the utterly revolting voice, the phrases and tone emitted by the corpse were both modern and commonplace. This proved that the one speaking through the corpse's mouth was no spirit but a living, breathing human being.

"It is as the Great One has surmised."

Zhou respectfully bowed. Though the corpse doll had no gift of sight, it was still able to convey the atmosphere here. At the very least, Zhou's attitude was not supplicating.

"Their mission was merely complementary. The project with the media is proceeding smoothly."

"What is your progress?"

"Approximately 40% with televised media and 30% with the press."

"Once you reach 50% with the televised media, begin operations at once. Continue until the politicians beholden to the voters are forced to act."

"As you command."

Zhou bowed deeply and the doll emitted a satisfied aura.

The will-o-the-wisp in the empty eye sockets flickered out.

By the time the young man raised his head, the doll had closed its eyes.

Zhou rose to his feet and remained facing the doll as he backed out of the basement. After closing the door behind his back, the young man finally sighed in relief now that the doll was no longer in sight. Even Ancient Magic users from the mainland who specialized in Ghostwalker like Zhou had nothing to do with Zombification; speaking to a corpse was always a grotesque experience no matter how many times he did it.

(Well…… I suppose that is a vessel that befits a malicious spirit who carries a grudge against the Great Han.)

However insulting to his leader, Zhou's private ruminations failed to detract from his devilish smile in the slightest.

Chapter 5

AD 2096, April 6, the first day of the new school year. Tatsuya and Miyuki went to school, Minami stayed home. The cliché phrase "it's been a while", didn't fit, because they had occasionally gone to school for Student Council meetings during spring break.

After today and tomorrow, the two siblings would no longer be alone on the path to and from school. Perhaps because she was conscious of that, Miyuki glued herself to Tatsuya during the short commute from the station even more than usual. From afar or even from close by, their point-blank nearness gave off the illusion that they were walking arm and arm.

From the start, these siblings had become pretty well known among the magic high school students, whose numbers could not be called small. At this time, almost no student did not know of the relationship of the elder brother and his younger sister. The 'conventional people' who raised their eyebrows at the impropriety of relatives who acted more like lovers were not just one or two. It was not a surprise that there were no brave souls (or possibly boorish people) calling out to them to take them to task, but the number of people who directed shocked eyes at them was not small.

Naturally, such a thing — being surrounded by those stares — did not make Miyuki anxious at all. For her, people who could not face her and speak up were only riffraff. Even under normal circumstances, it could be said that she accumulated a lot of looks, so the times she wasn't being looked at were fewer. For Miyuki, other people's stares were too numerous to be bothered about.

On the other hand, there was no way Tatsuya could "not let the gazes of others bother him" like his sister.

He served as his sister's guard. He defended his sister from all malicious intent. This was his assigned duty and, simultaneously, a privilege he would not let others take from him. Tatsuya could not ignore any ill will directed against Miyuki.

This was not particularly difficult. Because the trifling ill will was directed at Tatsuya himself, no one was able to direct it against Miyuki.

It was hard to aim a negative eye at Miyuki. For example, even those who felt jealous of Miyuki had difficulty aiming their jealousy. Her looks and talent were too luminous; jealously sent against her became a sort of

graciousness. Due to the difficulty of directing malicious intent against Miyuki, a strong will was needed to do it.

Thus, if Tatsuya was aware of it, it was never a mere fluke.

Paired with a strong will, the stare was neither distinctly hostile nor friendly. The look being aimed at Miyuki was of an unusual type. Especially, from the opposite sex, it was even less understandable.

Tatsuya was familiar with the boy's face. He had not met him face to face, but he had seen the 3D image that had come with the profile. The boy was one year younger than him, the freshman representative—

(—That is certainly the eldest son of the Shippou Clan.)

Unconsciously, his brow furrowed, but Tatsuya deliberately kept his expression from changing. Tatsuya vigilantly kept himself from displaying oversensitivity, but perhaps because he was aware of the intermittent glances Tatsuya sent his way, Takuma averted his face and disappeared into an alley entrance.

"Onii-sama?"

Immediately afterward, Miyuki spoke to him in a doubtful voice. She keenly perceived that a fraction of her brother's mind had slipped away from her. Even though she could ignore the gazes of the riffraff, she couldn't ignore Tatsuya's gaze.

Tatsuya shook his head to tell Miyuki "it's nothing", turned around in response to a greeting of "morning" and raised his hand.

Erika, followed by Leo, Honoka, Shizuku, Mizuki, and Mikihiko were in a mass. It wasn't unusual for all of them to be together after school, but it had been a while since they had all been together on the way to school. Especially Shizuku, who hadn't come to school with them since before the end of last year, because she had been studying abroad.

Seeing as at last their final member had returned, the faces were all the same, but some of them were wearing a design on their uniforms different than what they had until last month, when they were first years.

On Tatsuya's breast, there was now an emblem of an eight petal flower surrounded by a gear.

The same embroidered design was on Mizuki's blazer.

And on the left side of Mikihiko's chest, there was the eight petal icon of First High School.

"Mikihiko, how does it feel to wear the uniform of the first course?"

"Don't mock me, Tatsuya."

Mikihiko answered Tatsuya's broadly grinning teasing congratulations with a pained but smug smile. They had known that Mikihiko would be transferring to the first course since last month; however, this was the first time they each got to look at each other in their new uniforms.

"How about you, Tatsuya, how does the new blazer feel?"

"Even though you called it new, it only looks that way."

Mikihiko's remark had also referred to the fact that the magic engineering course was a new course. Only the name denoted what it was and instruction for the brand new course hadn't even started yet. Well, not just instruction but everything about the new course would start from today. At any rate, until the day it actually started not even the class lineup was clear; indeed, the feeling of not enough preparations having been made was incontrovertible. The remark about only the appearance being changed was also a joke but it was not without foundation.

"Ooh, cynical."

However, Tatsuya had a serene, or rather a "it doesn't really matter", attitude about it, contrary to his friends' expectations it seemed. With Tatsuya's personality, they hadn't expected him to show great joy about the class separation, but they had imagined he would be a little buoyant.

"Re-al-ly, Mizuki was fairly slack-jawed."

After Leo, Erika rang out her discontent. She made a sidelong glare of disappointment, but as her opponent was Tatsuya, the dart of her glare passed on right through to the other side.

"I… I was not slack-jawed!"

Mizuki protested without thinking. She hadn't intended to pay heed to her second course friends (in short, Erika and Leo). But she couldn't conceal the embarrassed happiness on her face that Erika had pointed out.

"It's all right not to over do it."

And as Erika's mischievous smile showed there was undoubtedly no need for Mizuki to be worried about their feelings.

The Magical Engineering Course classroom in the main school building was in the middle of the classrooms on the side on the third floor. Class E. In short, the room right above the one Tatsuya and Mizuki had been going to until last month.

By the way, Erika and Leo were both in class F. When they found out their assigned homeroom from the school's wireless, the pair had blatantly displayed their distaste. Perhaps their attitude was genuine, or maybe they were concealing their real feelings out of embarrassment… only the people themselves knew and, in any case, it didn't really matter either way to Tatsuya. Though, Mizuki and Honoka were deeply interested.

When Tatsuya entered the classroom, the seats were about half occupied. The five rows of five were the same as last year; the Japanese phonetic order of the seating was also the same as when they were first years. However, did the A I U E O lined up on the sides without regard to gender have a special meaning or was it merely a whim?

After wasting less than a second on solving the meaningless puzzle, Tatsuya went to his own seat. The first row from the hallway, second seat from the front. Like the previous year, Mizuki was in the seat next to him. Well, this had no special meaning since in Japanese phonetics, they were Shi-ba and Shi-ba-ta.

"Mizuki is next to Tatsuya this year too, huh. Maybe I should've attempted to change classes as well?"

The one who grumbled the unnecessary joke without caring whether anyone heard it was Erika, who had both her arms on the rail of a wide open window.

"Surely, that's not needed. You're in the class next door."

Leo, who was peering at the face of Erika, who was thrusting her body out the window, followed up with a remark that, contrary to its contents, was spoken in a regretful tone.

"That's right. Even though we're in different classes, it's not particularly inconvenient."

One year before, this scene would have become an exchange of abusive language, but Erika didn't follow up with an inflammatory remark or tit for tat. That change was a little amusing to Tatsuya, as that behavior (on the surface at least) indicated agreement with Leo's words without looking at him even a little.

"Since intruding on another class isn't forbidden."

"Only taking instruction in another class is."

Mizuki promptly showed her agreement with Tatsuya's statement; she probably thought she could divert Erika. Of course, although she looked wild, Erika had almost never escaped from instruction. Tatsuya was the clear winner in number of times leaving the classroom during instruction.

"That's also true."

Perhaps, Erika no longer remembered placing any objections. She readily nodded her assent to Mizuki's words.

"Nevertheless… there are a lot of unfamiliar faces."

Erika murmured that as she looked around the room, changing her train of thought. The ostensibly sociable Erika remembered the faces and names of almost all one hundred of the second course students in their year. In short, 'the unfamiliar faces' were former first course students.

"Ah, now that you've mentioned it… it does seem a little unexpected."

The number of students inside the classroom had considerably increased as it got closer to the start of instruction, and two thirds of the seats were now filled. That was confirmed by examining the group, and the genuinely sociable Leo, in a voice soaked in surprise as his words suggested, exhibited his agreement.

The pair — no, although she hadn't piped up to agree with Erika's statement, Mizuki should be included — the trio had believed that most of the people who would want to transfer into the new Magic Engineering course would probably be second course students. They hadn't thought that the extremely proud first course students would choose to share a classroom with second course students.

For Tatsuya, although the first course transfers were surprising, it was a trifling matter, so even though he could certainly understand why Erika and the rest had thought that way, he hadn't broken in with any special comment.

"By the way."

Erika wasn't fixated on this topic either. Besides, there was something she was more interested in.

"Tatsuya, you're being glared at a lot."

Erika's remark was affirmed by Tatsuya displaying a slight shrug of his shoulders. Even before she pointed it out, he had been aware that he was on the receiving end of a fixed glare of hatred. And he had already grasped whose glare it was. As for why he was being glared at, since he couldn't really understand, it might weigh on his mind. Nevertheless, he confirmed that he had more reasons to hate her than she had to hate him. Since merely being looked at didn't cause actual harm, Tatsuya planned to leave it alone, but it seemed like for Erika, it wasn't something she could ignore. Her disagreeable voice showed what was going on in the back of her mind.

"She caused all that trouble in so many ways; I wonder if she still hasn't acknowledged that it was all her own temper tantrum."

"Even if she knows it was a temper tantrum, she probably can't just replace all those emotions quickly."

"Quickly… it's already been half a year."

"Only half a year."

As Erika answered him thus, Tatsuya directed his eyes fleetingly to the origin of the stare, which was off to the side behind him. Flustered, Hirakawa Chiaki, who had been glowering at him in hatred, averted her eyes. Immediately afterward — perhaps she was mad at herself for showing cowardice — she scowled at him with a grim look in her eye.

That attitude of Chiaki's grated against Erika's nerves even more. Naturally Erika, who had seen the brave display of introspection by Sayaka, who had been deceived into becoming part of a terrorist group after the incident, had trouble making up her mind about Chiaki's behavior, since with the excuse of avenging a misplaced grudge, Chiaki had knowingly become a cat's paw of foreign spies and even now hadn't apologized to

Tatsuya once. On the other hand, Erika, who didn't have any problem picking fights, did want to go after Chiaki herself, but there was a chance that doing so would cause Tatsuya trouble instead. Besides, Erika felt that Chiaki's impudent actions just now meant she was 'trying to pick a fight.'

A sharp light resided in both of Erika's eyes. Her eyes did not narrow; to the contrary, both of her eyes were open with the corners of her eyes raised. Although Erika's beautiful face had a catlike air about it, it was tinged with a ferocity that brought a tiger or leopard to mind. Her appearance even aroused some slight desire to appreciate her aesthetically in Tatsuya; however, if he let this situation go on, he was guaranteed to be embroiled in a whirlpool of trouble. Tatsuya considered the cost of being an onlooker a little too expensive.

"Erika, it's useless to speak to her."

Erika turned her sullen face to Tatsuya. A weak willed man would've immediately prostrated himself and apologized energetically, but unfortunately Tatsuya didn't have any such laudableness (?).

"I'll put out the sparks I let fall myself. That is, if the other side has the nerve to fan the spark into a flame."

Tatsuya smiled cruelly. Seeing nothing friendly in that look, Erika calmed down. Perhaps it was an indication that she was showing her regret by trying to conceal her embarrassed smile.

At that point, a voice intervened with good timing and changed the mood.

"Can I bother you for a bit?"

Tatsuya turned around to the voice that called out to him from right behind him. A male student, who had just entered the classroom with an amiable smile, was standing there.

"Is this the first time we've properly greeted each other? I am Tomitsuka Hagane. Nice to meet you, Shiba-kun."

"That's right, I know your name, but essentially this might be 'the first meeting'. Shiba Tatsuya. Nice to meet you, Tomitsuka."

While grasping the offered hand in return, Tatsuya answered in his usual tone. To be truthful, wasn't shaking hands a little over the top for a self-introduction between fellow classmates, Tatsuya thought, but he didn't

reveal his feelings. Tatsuya's surprise over Tomitsuka being here also didn't show on his face.

Nonetheless, Tatsuya's friends didn't have a poker face like Tatsuya's. For example, Mizuki fixedly stared at Tomitsuka, who had sat down right behind Tatsuya, and when she came back to herself, her face turned red. She was probably embarrassed over her own bad manners. Mizuki spoke to Tomitsuka with an embarrassed grin.

"Tomitsuka-kun, nice to meet you. I am Shibata Mizuki. Pleased to meet you."

"I am pleased to meet you too."

Tomitsuka's friendly smile rid Mizuki of her embarrassed grin. Watching what was somewhat a normal high school exchange at last released the other two from their petrified state.

"How unexpected… for the fifth-ranked Tomitsuka to join the Magic Engineering course."

As her words implied, the awkward words Erika directed to someone were full of surprise.

That was understandable. As Erika said, Tomitsuka was a top class honor student who was ranked fifth in the combined scores of the final exams at the end of their last school year (the top of the overall scores were 1st place Miyuki, 2nd place Honoka, 3rd place a male student by the name of Igara Sousuke, 4th place Akechi Eimi; Shizuku didn't make the list because she was studying abroad). With such a satisfactory record as a first course student, there didn't seem to be any need to switch to the magic engineering course. —As far as those with objective eyes could see.

"Are you Chiba-san? As someone who is also from the Hundred Families, I think you might be aware Chiba-san, but my family specializes more in combat than in emergency aid, and I… have a problem with my practical skills."

A question hadn't been exactly addressed to him, but Tomitsuka answered Erika while directing a slightly pained face at her. Thus, Erika (and Leo as well) recalled the gossip about the other name associated with Tomitsuka.

Range Zero, a distance range of zero, was his nickname; while it was a title of honor implying the manifestation of matchless strength at zero

distance, simultaneously it was an insult that said he could not do distance magic. Actually, it wasn't that he couldn't use it at all; however, there was no quibbling over the fact that Tomitsuka had a problem with long distance aiming which he himself recognized.

From the side, Tatsuya sent a lifeline to Erika, who was lost at sea and unable to find words to answer him with.

"Everyone has strengths and weaknesses."

Was he comforting him or needling him, to this questionable lifeline,

"It sounds persuasive when Tatsuya said it."

With an earnest voice, Leo broke into the pause.

Tomitsuka's 'bitter smile' changed into a 'sarcastic smile'.

"I found you, Tomitsuka-kun!"

Immediately afterward, his complex tangle of emotions was blown away by the cheerful voice that thrust into the classroom of second year class E.

"Akechi-san!?"

In front of the sight of Tomitsuka, who hurriedly turned around, 'Amy' — that is, Akechi Eimi — was noisily trotting to him from the classroom's rear entrance. Due to the fact that she was an athlete in last summer's Nine Schools competition, she was also an acquaintance of Tatsuya.

There was a large number of high-pitched clicking sounds as the framework of Tomitsuka's desk brought her to a halt; her hand was raised like she was trying to throw a ball through a hoop in some fashion and her whole face was smiling.

"Morning, Tomitsuka-kun."

It was as if a '!' and a '♪' dancing were at the end of her words, so energetic was her greeting. Although they both had carefree personalities, Eimi was different from Erika whose joyfulness was concealing the wounds in her heart — Eimi was joyful to the core. She was the valuable type that made those watching her feel that the worries they were moping over were foolish. Despite the scene just now, due to Eimi's arrival, all awkward feelings had been wiped from the atmosphere.

"Ah, yes. Morning, Akechi-san."

Tomitsuka was drawn by the charm of that energy. No, the feeling given off by the look on his face was not 'Eimi is charming Tomitsuka'; 'Eimi is overwhelming Tomitsuka' seemed closer to being correct.

"Shiba-kun, morning."

"Morning, Amy. Come to think of it, Amy and Tomitsuka were in the same class last year."

"That's right. You're well informed?"

"It's a minor thing."

Tatsuya sent a smile drained of energy at the wide-eyed Eimi.

"Amy, this girl is Shibata Mizuki. This is Chiba Erika. The one over there is Saijou Leonhart. The three of them were my classmates last year."

Mizuki and the others shouldn't have had any interaction with Eimi. And Tatsuya's hypothesis was not off the mark.

"Nice to meet you. I am Akechi Eimi. Call me Amy."

Tatsuya had introduced the three simply (carelessly?) and Eimi had readily introduced herself in return.

"O.K., Amy. It's all right if you call me Erika."

The one who immediately responded was, naturally, Erika.

"Please call me Leo."

"Nice to meet you, Akechi-san."

Leo followed with a (supplementary) self introduction and Mizuki bobbed her head. As she did so, for some reason Eimi puffed out her red cheeks in dissatisfaction.

"Amy."

"Eh?"

"Didn't I tell you to call me Amy?"

Mizuki could not understand what she'd done to make Eimi angry and her eyes showed guilt and innocence. If you looked at it objectively, Eimi's insistence was nearly irrational, but cases where force triumphed over reason had been observed repeatedly in the world. Anyway, Erika and Leo were dumbfounded since they didn't know what kind of girl Eimi was, and Tatsuya, who somewhat knew her, was not showing any intention of intervening for some reason. And the other person who knew her, Tomitsuka, appeared to be merely impatient and reluctant to intervene.

"Umm… nice to meet you, Amy. It would be fine if you addressed me as Mizuki."

In the end, although she was puzzled, Mizuki gave in.

"Yes. Nice to meet you, Mizuki."

At once, Eimi smiled openly. The smile was more foolishly naïve than pleasant; it had the effect of making people slightly doubt that the selfish manner of speaking she used had really taken place.

Satisfied, Eimi nodded and pivoted her body to turn towards Tomitsuka.

"Now, it's Tomitsuka's turn."

"Uhh?"

Why had the conversation turned to himself? What the heck did she mean by his turn? Tomitsuka was completely dumbfounded by this too rapid turn of events.

"Amy."

Eimi once again voiced her nickname.

Tomitsuka still didn't understand what Eimi was demanding from him. The puzzled Tomitsuka looked right and left and became aware that Tatsuya was enduring the scene with a smile.

Tomitsuka asked for help from Tatsuya by eye contact. Tatsuya constructed a sober expression to answer Tomitsuka's 911 call.

"You don't like being called Akechi-san, right?"

Tatsuya's hypothesis was on the mark it seemed, as Eimi nodded yes-yes.

"Don't you want Tomitsuka to also call you by your nickname?"

Eimi's sullen display with Mizuki had foreshadowed this. Well, Tatsuya had already expected this development so he hadn't said anything during the previous episode.

On the other hand, Tomitsuka's face started to flow with cold sweat.

"Eh, umm, Akechi-san, you called me 'Tomitsuka-kun' and…"

"Oh? So it would be all right if I called you 'Hagane-kun'?"

So that's it ~ you should have said so earlier ~ Eimi said with her eyes while she leaned toward Tomitsuka, peering up at his face with both arms behind her back, holding her hands together. Tomitsuka was clearly flustered to anyone's eyes. The lukewarm eyes of Tatsuya and the others went to Tomitsuka, who was leaning backwards with an even stiffer face.

"No, um, that isn't exactly what I wanted to say… Ah!"

Tomitsuka was desperately trying to avoid meeting the eyes of Eimi, who was blissfully staring at him, and he deliberately stood up and raised his voice when he caught a stare flowing at him from two seats away.

"Akechi-san, let's have this talk next time."

Evading Eimi, who had blocked off half his field of vision by leaning forward, Tomitsuka walked toward the seat of the girl that had been looking at him.

"Is that you, Hirakawa-san? You're in this class as well?"

Tatsuya and the others were just barely able to catch Tomitsuka's voice from where they were. They weren't able to catch Chiaki's diffidently whispered words of reply at all.

"Amy, is it all right not to follow him?"

Erika spoke to Eimi, who looked sullen about being abruptly left behind, in a purposely low tone.

"Do you think there's nothing you can do now but retreat…?"

Was this the whisper of a devil tempting a human heart into sin, or was it the voice of an angel to someone facing a hard road. —Of course, it wasn't

such a grandiose thing; it was simply nothing more than the utterance of an imp egging on her fellow schoolmate, but the effect was instantaneous. Eimi nodded with a determined look and rapidly went after Tomitsuka.

"…You are one scary female."

To Leo, who was not quipping but whispering it in a somber tone,

"This way is more constructive, right?"

Erika answered with a broad grin.

"Certainly, this is an extremely interesting development."

A bit of surprise mixed into the shocked look Mizuki gave to Tatsuya, who was looking at the gazes of undisguised curiosity that onlookers directed at the three of them, Tomitsuka, Eimi, and Chiaki, which he just pointed out.

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The youthful drama of which Tomitsuka was the lead actor (or perhaps the prey) was taken care of by the ringing of the bell. After Eimi left the Class E classroom at a lively trot, Erika and Leo went to the Class F classroom.

Afterwards, there was no ceremony for the first time all the students were assembled for instruction. The stance of the school was that getting the information needed was an individual responsibility. From now on, this class would have a teacher in charge of their practical skills (just like classes A-D in the first course). Over half the class considered not even displaying the name of the teacher until the actual day it started to be pretty over the top, but Tatsuya was part of the minority who didn't think so.

It probably hadn't been decided til the last minute — if Tatsuya's supposition was completely accurate.

After all, if the number of magicians qualified to be teachers hadn't been inadequate, then half the students that they had the capacity for at First, Second, and Third high schools wouldn't be placed in a lower caste.

Taking the dearth of personnel into consideration, the teacher in charge of Class E's practical skills instruction would be a fairly eccentric individual for a magician educator and might not be much of a teacher, Tatsuya predicted. For example, very elderly or perhaps the opposite, fairly young.

If all the instructor was going to do was teach practical engineering skills, then the teacher would not need to have a great deal of skill as a magician, so the possibility that they might dispatch a researcher without any qualifications as a teacher was also within Tatsuya's expectations.

However, thirty seconds after instruction was to have started, a practical skills teacher stood in front of the entire second year class E who did not meet Tatsuya's expectations. It also seemed like the teacher was not what the other students imagined either, as a small commotion ran through the classroom.

The one who appeared was a woman in her forties.

Of course, that alone wouldn't strike anyone as unusual. There were clearly more male instructors in magic high schools, but female ones weren't all that unusual. The surprise came from the woman's looks.

Her hair was blonde. The color of her eyes were blue. Her skin color white. Her body was tall and her legs were long from this and her other physical traits; it was clear from looking at her that the woman was a Caucasian of Nordic descent.

"I am Jennifer Smith (sumisu)."

She gave her name in the style of English speaking countries and her full name was an English one.

"I am originally from Boston, but I became a naturalized citizen eighteen years ago."

However, these words melted the majority of their doubts. If that much time had passed since she had been naturalized, then there must be no worries on the security front. Normally, the patriotism of naturalized citizens (toward the nation that naturalized them) was required to be firmer than that of the citizens born in a nation. If they did not display more loyalty to their new country than to their former country, then their naturalization wouldn't be recognized. In the case of a magic researcher with many chances to connect with national secrets, this is especially true. There was still the question of why she would throw away her nationality to become a naturalized Japanese citizen when the USNA was not only the wealthiest nation in modern era, but also had the most cutting edge magic techniques, but to Tatsuya that was comparatively unimportant.

"Until the end of the last school year, I was a professor at the National Magic University, but from this school year on, the main school has placed the instruction in magic engineering for this class in my hands. I look forward to working with you."

She is in the same situation as Tsuzura-sensei, Tatsuya thought. Tsuzura's back-story was that his too independent mind had caused his downfall. What could be the circumstances in Smith-sensei's case? —Tatsuya considered that hypothesizing she was a troublemaker was both rude and arbitrary.

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They had to register for electives by the end of first period, but from the second period on they immediately started on the regular curriculum; it was now the noon break.

Tatsuya arrived at the Student Council room.

He was, from now on, a Student Council Vice President. Tatsuya had transferred from the Public Morals Committee to the Student Council due to a secret(?) agreement between Azusa and Kanon; however, this was the result implemented by completely ignoring Tatsuya's own will. Since he didn't have any lingering attachment to the Public Morals Committee and he didn't object to joining the Student Council, Tatsuya hadn't put up any resistance, but if, for example, Tatsuya had made a show of resisting, then he probably would have been persuaded after all. —Not by Azusa, but by Miyuki. Perhaps, Tatsuya didn't try to resist because he understood that.

Whatever was going on in the background, First High School's new regime for the AD 2096 new school year was safely launched. The Public Morals committee had also added new members. Mikihiko had been approved as Tatsuya's successor under the recommendation system by the Student Council. From the clubs, Shizuku was chosen to supplement the lack of members brought by the end of the last school year. Today was the first day of the new school year and in the Student Council room, the roster of Azusa, Kanon, Isori, Tatsuya, Miyuki, Honoka, Shizuku and Mikihiko, in the spirit of a 'welcome new members' party, were holding a luncheon.

The student council meeting table was a little cramped for eight people. Perhaps Kanon thought that was a good excuse for totally gluing herself to Isori. While the pair's passionate — Isori looked a little uncomfortable —

scene seemed to embarrass Azusa and Mikihiko, Tatsuya and Shizuku were poker faced, Honoka seemed somewhat envious and Miyuki looked at the scene with a smile; lunchtime proceeded harmoniously.

By the way, while Honoka wanted to take Kanon's lead and glue herself to Tatsuya because it was cramped, with Miyuki's standard attitude unbroken she couldn't muster the determination.

After the meal ended, each of the eight received a tea cup or a coffee cup according to their preferences. The one waiting on them was the 3H-P94, Pixie. The girl-shaped robot was originally on loan to the Robot Research Club; however, due to various circumstances, especially because Pixie itself wished it, from today on it became something for Tatsuya to use in the Student Council room.

The topic of their first lunchtime conversation was the new Magical Engineering Course's unique choice of professor. However, close to halfway through the noon break, their interest turned to the imminent admissions ceremony.

"Is there another rehearsal after school today?"

Mikihiko, who had not been involved in the preparations for the admissions ceremony, asked, politely conscious of the presence of the upperclassman,

"It's more of a business meeting than a rehearsal. There are only two formal rehearsals — one during spring break, and one immediately before the ceremony. And since we're only practicing the program, we won't be reading the formal address."

Miyuki replied in her default polite tone for speaking to male students.

"Last year as well?"

"Yes."

Miyuki, who had made the formal address last year, replied to Shizuku's follow up question also.

"Eh, really? It did not look that way at all."

Kanon's response displayed her surprise in a way that looked slightly exaggerated. Naturally, for that reason, the person herself immediately spoke up.

"Our turns were pretty tough… because it's hard work, I thought we'd hold many rehearsals."

"At any rate, it was rough…"

As was her apparent habit, Kanon belatedly cut off her words just after she committed a verbal gaffe. Azusa, who had been employed as the freshmen representative the year before last, was timidly sinking into a deep depression.

"Well, well. Nakajou-san was nervous. That's not particularly unusual."

Isori quickly followed up after his betrothed's error on one side,

"Of course, Miyuki not getting stage fright was not all that peculiar."

And Tatsuya followed up after Isori to prevent Miyuki from taking it the wrong way.

"Dear me, Onii-sama. Even I was nervous."

Miyuki's timing was not very natural when she spoke from her place next to Tatsuya, with both hands clasped on her thighs. In that state, she leaned her upper body to peek up at her elder brother's face. While making a pained smile at his sister's expression with slightly puffed cheeks, Tatsuya lightly caressed Miyuki's hair, making her return her head to the original distance. Miyuki let out a small "Ah…" and sent a bashful smile to Tatsuya. Shizuku jabbed Honoka, whose face had frozen in an "Aargh", with her elbow in her flank, and Kanon, who was closely sticking to Isori, looked innocent and unaware of her own inappropriateness.

In the confused atmosphere, Mikihiko deliberately coughed to return things to normal. And Tatsuya spoke to Mikihiko, whose face showed the effects of his effort to cough as if nothing had happened.

"Actually, neither Miyuki or myself has met this year's freshmen representative face to face yet."

"That's because the school takes the lead in preparations for incoming freshmen."

Upon taking note of Tatsuya's words, Isori, who was more cognizant of the details than he, entered explanation mode.

"Even though the student's autonomy is respected, an event like the admissions ceremony, which has many distinguished guests attending, is of course another matter. Nonetheless, the Student Council handles the preparations on the current students' side."

"Are you saying… that the incoming freshmen aren't yet students of our school?"

"No, Mikihiko, that's absurd."

Without reservation, Tatsuya used a one-liner to deal with Mikihiko's meaningless words. The trace of envy that could be seen in Isori's eyes over their easy relationship with each other was surely only an illusion, of course.

"We don't know the real reason. So this is only a hypothesis to us."

With the smile still pasted on Isori's face, his actual feelings were not something that could be glimpsed.

"Nakajou-san, have you met him face to face?"

When Isori changed the topic, Kanon displayed an interest without delay.

"You mean Shippou-kun?"

Azusa cast down her eyes as she pondered when gazes filled with curiosity turned toward her.

"I have… he seems like an eager boy."

She probably did not want to prejudice them against him. Azusa had chosen harmless and inoffensive words, but,

"An ambitious boy, eh."

Seeing the lightly pained smile Azusa gave when Kanon put her words into blunt terms then, it seems that Azusa also actually shared the same opinion.

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The living room after dinner. In accordance with the division of labor, the dirty dishes were left to Minami and Miyuki was preparing coffee to Tatsuya's tastes. To his sister, who had sat down next to the side table she had placed her own coffee on,

"If you consider his position as the eldest son of the Shippou family, he probably can't help being an ambitious person."

Tatsuya started the conversation like that with a soothing voice.

"Onii-sama, why are you suddenly bringing up Shippou-kun?"

With both her hands folded together and placed on her thigh, Miyuki tilted her head inquiringly in a polite ladylike manner. There was no way Tatsuya was fooled by her formal face.

"Just because he has his reasons, there's no need for us to bend over backwards. As long as we don't have a quarrel with him, we don't need to be any friendlier to him."

"I did not quarrel or anything like that."

As Tatsuya had been telling her not to pick a fight in a rather roundabout way, Miyuki looked the other way with a sulky look. —For her to take that attitude could only mean that she was somewhat self aware. He would hesitate to call the first meeting between Miyuki and the eldest son of the Shippou Clan one of compliments and friendliness.

Naturally, a quarrel had not been started from Miyuki's side. At first, Miyuki also intended to welcome the freshmen representative that had become her junior warmly, nevertheless…

"Let me introduce you. This is Shippou Takuma-kun, who is serving as this year's freshmen representative."

After school in the student council room. Azusa was introducing him to the officers who were all present — Isori, Miyuki, Honoka, and Tatsuya — and Shippou Takuma bobbed his head quickly. This attitude was fairly common for a freshman which continued when it came to Isori,

"Vice President Shiba Tatsuya. Nice to meet you, Shippou-kun."

Just as Tatsuya introduced himself, there was a complete change.

"Shippou, Takuma. Pleased to meet you."

There was an unnatural emphasis on the family name in his way of speaking, but his language was within the bounds of politeness. However, his attitude could not be called all that polite. Takuma wasn't looking at Tatsuya's face, but his left chest.

"…Shippou-kun?"

When Azusa spoke softly to him, Takuma looked a little taken aback and afterwards put an awkwardly friendly smile on his face.

"Pardon me. The gear shaped emblem Shiba-senpai is wearing is unfamiliar."

Hearing Takuma's excuse, Azusa nodded "Ah, I see."

"It is the emblem of the new Magic Engineering course that started this year."

"Oh, that's it."

Although he probably didn't mean to do it, he cast out his acknowledgement in a rather careless manner, indicating his lack of interest. Tatsuya did not consider that to be offensive. The Shippou clan's trump card 'Million Edges' was unusual for Modern Magic, because the technique did not use a CAD. Tatsuya had heard gossip from his fellow engineers that the Shippou clan had a tendency to neglect Magic Engineering, perhaps for that reason. Everybody had their own way of looking at things. To him it had value, but he could not force other people to share his sense of values.

However, it was not something Miyuki could overlook. A haughty expression, a disrespectful look in his eye. A foundationless confidence of one's own superiority and contempt for someone for no reason. The eyes of this freshman were wearing the same look as her fellow freshmen last year, who scorned her elder brother as a 'Weed'. This could be felt by Miyuki.

Takuma, who immediately had to continue greeting people, turned to the next person. He did not intend to cause an uproar at this time and in the first place, Takuma was not aware of the rudeness of his behavior. It was not that he was being somewhat insensitive; one probably had to be very sensitive to how his rudeness would be taken. So he was not especially

prepared for the next student council officer — in short, for turning his eyes to Miyuki.

Immediately afterward, he visibly flinched which for Takuma was undoubtedly a disgrace. However, it had been inevitable. Because right then.

The Snow Queen descended.

Being in the presence of a blizzard princess or the like was not a gentle experience. An aloof face could be called ordinary; however, this ordinary face was a signal to prepare for a life or death struggle to previous Student Council officers. It was still far from the level it reached at that time — the Student Council Presidential election last year — however, it was not shameful that Takuma, who was experiencing it for the first time, should lose his composure due to the pressure being emitted.

Nonetheless, Takuma himself did not think so. He couldn't help giving off a mortified look. He rapidly constructed a courteous smile, but looking at it objectively, it was not a very good one.



"Fellow Vice President, Shiba Miyuki."

As fitting of her cold expression, Miyuki spoke only this statement for her self introduction.

"—Shippou Takuma. Nice to meet you."

The shaking in Takuma's voice was not out of fear but anger. He was disgusted with himself for being overwhelmed by Miyuki. He retained enough self control not to transfer the anger he felt at himself to other people, but Takuma was a naturally passionate boy. In order to restrain himself, he ground his back teeth. No matter how much he tried to smooth over his expression, it wasn't enough to conceal it.

The attitudes of Miyuki and Takuma could not possibly be called harmonious. As the atmosphere gradually became more turbulent, Azusa started to get flustered. With last year's officers, Suzune would have followed up as the next one in this setting, but Isori, who held the same position this year, looked like he was unsure of what he should do.

Miyuki's actions were childish for an upperclassman; nonetheless, Takuma's conduct was also not the desired courtesy from a new student. The sense that they were both equally at fault was stymieing them.

The only one here now who had the potential to rebuke Miyuki and bring the situation to an end was Tatsuya, who was silently examining Takuma's facial expression.

…Afterwards, due to Honoka's forcefully cheerful self introduction, the thorny atmosphere lightened a little. Nonetheless, the atmosphere of the meeting remained strained in the Student Council room for the rest of the meeting.

There was not any type of rehearsal today; it was over shortly since they were only going over an already-decided program. If they had had to continue in that atmosphere for a long time, they would have had to worry about the outcome of the entrance ceremony. —If the tradition of inviting the freshmen representative to join the student council is taken into consideration, then it was already at a level that the potential harm to the Student Council's activities had to be a concern.

"But I didn't think we would suddenly be glaring at each other. The Shippou Clan's eldest son apparently has a belligerent disposition."

The attitude I took was not wrong, thought Miyuki. However, no matter how justifiable the reason she had — feeling that he had looked at the elder brother she loved and respected with scornful eyes — that did not change the fact that she had despoiled the mood of the Student Council. So Miyuki had prepared herself for a light scolding. So while she was in the mood to fend off the questions of her elder brother, who hardly ever rebuked her at all, Miyuki agreed with Tatsuya's words in a hesitant tone.

"I thought his attitude toward Onii-sama was not simply a type of insolence. I felt that he was concealing hostile intentions toward you."

Now, when she looked back calmly, she believed that Takuma's attitude was a little different from the one displayed by her classmates immediately after they were enrolled last year. He wasn't disdaining Tatsuya as worthless, he was set on forcibly acting superior in order to deal with an enemy from a subjectively superior position… no, Miyuki corrected herself; he did not have the luxury of keeping it concealed.

"That's right. He was watching us."

Tatsuya knew that the hostility from Takuma was more towards Miyuki rather than himself. This morning on the way to school, the person Takuma had been looking at intently as if he was glaring was not Tatsuya, but Miyuki. Tatsuya felt that the hostility directed against himself was simply appended to the hostility toward Miyuki.

On the other hand, Miyuki had not considered the idea that she was the main target and Tatsuya was only an additional target even a little bit. Miyuki was aware that Tatsuya had said 'us', but in her own mind, she persistently put her elder brother as the greater and herself as the lesser.

"I do not comprehend the reason, but I believe it is best if we do not take it too lightly. Not like last year."

Miyuki was talking about the incident that had taken place immediately after they enrolled last year caused by the domestic terrorism organization 'Blanche.' The impetus for the siblings to become deeply involved in the terrible situation that developed when terrorists infiltrated First High School had been Sayaka's invitations to Tatsuya. At first, Tatsuya had taken it lightly, only considering it 'an invitation to join in club activities'.

It was questionable if there would have been any changes in the developments that happened afterward had things been considered

seriously. The consequences (for the siblings) had not been all that great. However, to Miyuki, her brother's attitude that 'everything will be okay if we don't get into a fight with him' as the way they should react to Takuma's challenging manner was reminiscent of the time with Sayaka, that he felt there was no need for caution.

"Last year? Ah, no, it probably won't become anything like that? After all, he is a member of the Twenty-Eight families."

By the Twenty-Eight families, he referred to the Ten Master Clans and the eighteen associated clans, which wasn't a common way to refer to them. Only someone who was referring to their common origin in the magician development research laboratories would lump the Ten Master Clans and the eighteen associated clans together as equals and use that expression for them.

"I wouldn't know anything about Shippou Takuma's natural disposition, but…"

While holding his coffee cup, Tatsuya muttered something like a monologue.

"It is said that because of their rivalry with the Saegusa clan, the Shippou Clan has the strongest desire to ascend to the position of one of the Master Clans among the eighteen associated clans."

Miyuki knew of the hostility between the Saegusa clan and the Shippou clan, but this was probably the first time she heard the rest of it. She listened to Tatsuya's comments with a deeply interested look.

"He only wants his own power acknowledged because he really craves the spotlight, like most boys around our own age."

"Well, are you like that too Onii-sama?"

"Well, about that. Ordinarily, I too would want that."

Tatsuya answered her with a wry smile, feeling like he was being teased by his little sister when she asked him that.

"It seems that Shippou-kun has the kind of desire to be in the spotlight that makes him work twice as hard as other people. He probably wants to demonstrate that he has power suitable to be a member of the Ten Master Clans. So perhaps he acts hostile to people he feels might hinder him."

"But we are not doing anything in particular to hinder Shippou-kun, are we?"

"For someone who wants to be acknowledged by those around him, people who are already acknowledged are a hindrance."

Miyuki agreed with the words Tatsuya related to her with a wry smile and a deep nod.

"I see. In short, Shippou-kun is jealous of Onii-sama's reputation."

Tatsuya almost spit out his coffee in response to the comment Miyuki made to indicate 'her understanding'.

"No, Miyuki, the one he recognizes as his rival and feels jealous of is probably you."

"Me?"

Miyuki asked with her eyes if Takuma had really disregarded her Onii-sama to focus on herself, to which Tatsuya nodded his head countless times.

"He is this year's freshmen representative, you are last year's representative. That is enough of a reason to view you as a rival. Additionally, you were very active in the Nine Schools Competition. Doesn't he view me as hostile because I am Miyuki's hanger-on?"

"Absolutely not…! Onii-sama isn't Miyuki's hanger-on or anything like that!"

"No, it's alright not to get excited… I'm just making an assumption about how Shippou-kun looks at me."

"I will not accept any ridiculous assumptions like that."

"Even if you say you won't accept it..."

Tatsuya felt a little bit at a loss about how to handle Miyuki when he suddenly pressed one of her buttons.

"Rather it is I who is Onii-sama's… No, I must reluctantly admit that Onii-sama is my very important partner."

In the portion that was mumbled out of embarrassment, he heard 'Onii-sama's belonging' but Tatsuya didn't let it bother him. To Tatsuya, the

way she rephrased it was bold and fairly embarrassing but he ignored it as well.

"If we reconsider once more, there is also the possibility that he views us as hostile because he knows we are related to the Ten Master Clans."

He pointed this out in a nonchalant tone, but it had enough weight to bring Miyuki's mind back down to earth from where it had been lightly whirling around.

"He knows that we are related to the Yotsuba? Aren't you overthinking things, Onii-sama?"

"That's true. I don't believe he has — no, rather the Shippou clan has — the ability to penetrate the Yotsuba's control of information, but… I feel that there was some kind of strong impression of something of that level in his eyes."

What Tatsuya was recalling was not the scene in the Student Council room where they glared at each other, but the intermittent staring Takuma had done at Miyuki on the way to school. Miyuki was unaware that Takuma did that, so right now what her brother was saying didn't ring any bells.

Even so, Miyuki housed her brother's worry in her heart.

"That's true… he is a member of the Twenty-Eight Families, it might be better to be cautious."

…It was the right answer that the hostility directed to them related to the Ten Master Clans, but the idea that it was because they are related to the Yotsuba was completely wrong. The right answer would be because they were suspected of being related to the Saegusa, but neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki hit on that possibility. Even though they were friendly with Mayumi, for the pair who never forgot the complicated relationship between the Yotsuba and the Saegusa, being seen as part of the Saegusa's clique was something that would never occur to them.

Chapter 6

April 8th, the morning of the first day of school for First High School, which was attached to the National Magic University.

Today, there were no ill mannered stares lying in wait for them on the route to school; all three of them, Tatsuya, Miyuki and Minami, arrived at First High School two hours before the admissions ceremony. It goes without saying that commuting to school at this hour was in order to make preparations for the entrance ceremony. The three of them went straight to the site of their first appointment, the auditorium's preparation room. Minami was bothered by the fact that she, herself, was an outsider, but since she had not acquired much experience escorting Miyuki, Tatsuya had forced her to accompany them.

Isori and Honoka were already gathered in the prep room.

"Good morning, Tatsuya-san! Morning, Miyuki!"

"Morning, Shiba-kun. Right on time."

As Miyuki and Honoka exchanged greetings, Isori spoke to Tatsuya to their side.

"Good morning. You're early, Isori-senpai."

"It's my nature. If I don't come early, I can't stay calm."

After he smilingly answered Tatsuya's greeting, Isori's eyes went to Minami, who was waiting behind Miyuki.

"By the way, who is that girl? A new student?"

"Of course, Minami."

"Yes, Tatsuya-niisama."

"Niisama? Shiba-kun, do you have a younger sister other than Miyuki-san?"

In a sense, Isori had given him just the question he wanted.

"No, she is my cousin."

Tatsuya replied with the lie he had prepared before hand.

"Minami, this is Isori-senpai."

"Nice to meet you, Isori-senpai, I am Sakurai Minami. Thank you for the care you have always given to Tatsuya-niisama and Miyuki-neesama."

The overly polite speech Minami provided to greet Isori at Tatsuya's direction did not cause Isori to display any feelings of unease.

"Nice to meet you, Minami-san."

"I'm very honored to meet you."

Just as Minami once again sent a polite nicety towards Isori, Azusa, Kanon and the first year representative, Shippou Takuma, entered. (By the way, Kanon had already made one round of checking the guest chairs.)

"Good morning… could it be that I'm the last one?"

"Good morning, President. You are precisely on time."

Miyuki replied to Azusa, who had asked that question with a slightly surprised look, with a smile. Actually, she was three minutes late, but Miyuki's smiling face carried the intimation that any further apologies would not be allowed.

"Good morning, Isori-senpai, Shiba-senpai."

After getting Azusa to swallow the apologetic complaints they expected from her, Takuma stepped forward from behind her and spoke to first Isori, then Tatsuya.

"Morning, Shippou-kun."

He made a silent bow to Isori's reply and then turned around to face Miyuki and Honoka.

"Shiba-senpai, Mitsui-senpai, good morning. Please take care of me today."

Could he be nervous? Compared to the attitude Takuma hit them with the day before yesterday, the change was laudable.

"Good morning, Shippou-kun. Please give it your all today."

However, Miyuki was not a gentle girl who could be moved by something like that. Her smile was magnificent, her tone was gentle. The perfect face

of a lady in what was known as an impeccable social mask. Only Takuma's attitude had changed; he had not apologized for his rude manner the other day. Miyuki did not intend to make any concessions from her side as long as he didn't make any apologies to her elder brother.

Azusa and Isori looked confused by the smile so formal that no one could complain about it. With nothing to indicate ill intentions, they could not rebuke Miyuki. On the other hand, they could not let the uncomfortable mood that had started to spread simply be. Azusa requested help from Tatsuya with her puzzled eyes.

"Since all of us are here, let's go over the order of the ceremony first."

However, Tatsuya's only answer to that was to continue speaking as if nothing was wrong.

"That's right, we shouldn't waste time."

Without a moment's delay, Kanon provided supportive agreement. She too had probably decided that they needed to forcefully gloss over this scene.

"Then, starting with the arrangements for thirty minutes before the admissions ceremony. The guiding of guests is Miyuki's charge, the reception room is Honoka's…"

This was originally Azusa's duty, but Tatsuya was not concerned with that as he continued with the rehearsal arrangements. It wasn't right for Minami to be in this place, but no one pointed it out and it was completely forgotten.

And the rehearsal immediately before the ceremony proceeded safely in the strained atmosphere that did not allow them the luxury of feeling pressured by the imminence of the actual event. Azusa and the others breathed a sigh of relief as it finished; in spite of the entrance ceremony starting in thirty minutes, they were very relaxed or rather they were in an exhausted state. Tatsuya thought they were letting their attention wander a little too much, but it wasn't Tatsuya's job to point that out. Besides, it was better than getting so worked up beforehand that they were useless when the main event started. Reconsidering things, Tatsuya set about his own work.

"I'm going to guide the new students."

"Oh; take care, Onii-sama."

"Ah, thank you for your work."

As Miyuki and Azusa saw him off from the side of the stage and Minami bowed a silent goodbye, Tatsuya departed from the auditorium.

His duty before the ceremony was to guide students who didn't know where the event was. Last year, when Tatsuya met Mayumi, it was because she was assigned with the same job. When he heard that at the end of March when the jobs were assigned, Tatsuya hadn't felt it was a suitable job for the student council president, who had important duties just before the actual ceremony. However, he had now reconsidered and he thought it might have been an excuse to go outside and relieve her tension.

There was no way he himself was tense to that extent. Nevertheless, he was aware of a slight sense of freedom. Perhaps this was only natural, to be more at ease outside in the wind instead of inside preparing for a formal ceremony. Maybe, he resembled Mayumi on this point.

Possibly, because he was thinking about that stuff,

"Ah, Tatsuya-kun."

"Saegusa-senpai? Good morning."

Soon after he ventured in to the front yard, he unexpectedly met with Mayumi.

"Saying 'it's been a while'..... would be strange. Are you the new student guide?"

"Ah, well."

"So you joined the Student Council after all."

The student assigned the task of guiding new students wouldn't be anyone other than a member of the student council. However, the Public Morals Committee members were also patrolling in order to police the grounds, and temporary officials were also making the rounds. Thus, she should not have been able to conclude that he was an officer of the Student Council just from his answer, but Tatsuya did not say anything to refute the happily giggling Mayumi at all. He had, in fact, joined the Student Council, and another matter had caught his attention.

It did not really need saying, but Mayumi had graduated from First High School last month. Therefore, she wasn't wearing a uniform; this too was only natural. However, it probably couldn't be called 'expected' for her to be here in attire that looked very mature.

This was not the first time Tatsuya had seen Mayumi in non-uniform clothing. Last summer, when they departed for the Nine Schools Competition, he had seen her in a fairly spectacular summer dress. However, at the time, although she had been showing more skin, he hadn't felt like he was seeing a different person.

However, the Mayumi who was now clad in a feminine suit seemed older and a different person than she had been last month. The frills from her blouse were arranged in her chest area, she had a short jacket, and she also had on a tight skirt which did not give off an impression completely different than that of a high school girl. Could it be because of her deep red high heel pumps? Could it be because she had augmented her coloring with light makeup? Could it be because she had exchanged her large hair ribbon that held back her hair for an amber colored barrette? Perhaps, everything from the top on down created the effect, and more than anything else, Mayumi had gone up one more rung of the ladder to adulthood.

"Not even a month has passed since graduation, but… for some reason, you don't recognize me, Tatsuya-kun."

While Tatsuya had been thinking about those things, Mayumi, herself, on the other hand had claimed 'that he didn't recognize her' and penetrated the — what can probably be called inevitable — hole in his defenses.

"That may be true."

Mayumi smiled warmly at Tatsuya, who had just barely managed to reply.

"Eh. That uniform… it's the Magic Engineering Course, right? It's different from last year's."

"I think my uniform is the only thing that's changed."

His comment wasn't to hide his embarrassment — it was his actual opinion. That was what he really thought, but,

"No, I think you may not be aware of it yourself, but last year when we first met in this same season, the Tatsuya-kun who was wearing the Second

Course uniform had a completely different look than the present Tatsuya-kun. Compared to last year, you look more at ease."

Tatsuya did not dispute the claim Mayumi was making because he could not dispute it.

The fact was that he himself was not aware of it. That he was not self-aware was the truth.

To put it plainly, he had a bit of an inferiority complex about ordinary things.

"I concede. I do not understand my own self."

Tatsuya bravely raised a white flag. This was not merely lip service. 'Even though you try to understand yourself, you really can't' had been a bit of ancestral wisdom that had been around forever; he thought from his heart that this was the reason for his admission of defeat. However, seeing Mayumi just throw out her chest in triumph, a seed of rebellion sprouted within Tatsuya.

"You called it failing to recognize you, but I think Senpai has changed way more than me."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. You're completely a university student. You look very mature."

"Re-Really? It's just barely past the entrance ceremony."

She spoke as if to deny Tatsuya's impression, but Mayumi's not at all displeased look and bashful manner were obvious. (By the way, the university admissions ceremony was on April 6th.)

"Yes. From that barrette in your hair to those grown up pumps, they suit you very well. Like you're another person."

"Teehee, really… you say."

Mayumi was no longer trying to conceal anything, but she looked like she came to a sudden realization when her smile cracked and her face abruptly hardened.

"Tatsuya-kun… what do you mean by that…?"

No, it was not like she came to a realization. Evidently, Mayumi had realized something,

"Do you mean I rely more on them?"

"To make myself look different, more mature?"

She herself was being made fun of by Tatsuya.

"In short, you want to say I used to look childish…?"

"You're over-thinking this."

Naturally, Tatsuya was not so weak willed as to easily acknowledge his own misdeeds(?). Faced with Mayumi glaring up at him with upturned eyes, he made his face look sober and honest and answered with a voice that matched that face.

"I have never thought even one time that Saegusa-senpai's face or figure was childish."

"Face… figure…"

It seemed like Mayumi had received some kind of shock. Looking at her objectively, only her height was short; her face and figure were not childish. Anyone would say her face was the cute type, but it was not 'childish' and her voluptuous proportions could be called extremely mature for her age.

Nevertheless, apparently Mayumi had a hidden complex about — she wasn't really all that short — her height. Disregarding Tatsuya's denial, she was probably interpreting his words in the worst way.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I'm fine."

As she answered Tatsuya's words — in which she didn't hear all that much concern — in a confident tone that was half bluffing, Mayumi was once again glaring up at him.

"So Tatsuya-kun, what did you mean by a different person?"

"It doesn't really have a deep meaning. It's a common phrase."

The persistently questioning Mayumi made Tatsuya feel like 'he had failed.' This was not a topic he intended to speak on at length. He didn't intend to make light of Mayumi, but he could not have her occupy all his time.
—Come to think of it, why had Mayumi come to her alma mater, thought Tatsuya at last.

"Really? I don't think so."

Mayumi made a straight forward appraisal. The 'upturned stare' transformed into 'a scowl at point blank range'. Mayumi herself probably wasn't conscious of it, but a spectator would mistake it for unwanted closeness.

"No, really. …By the way, Senpai, why are you here today?"

Mayumi displayed an 'ah' look and a 'Hey, you!' in a shrill angry voice reached his ear at nearly the same time.

"Get away from Onee-chan! You skirt-chaser!"

At first, Tatsuya did not understand that those words were directed at himself. Because the label of 'skirt-chaser' was completely unwarranted. However, he saw that the petite girl that matched the shrill voice was coming down the path between the rows of cherry trees directly at him, and he became aware that apparently, this situation — the difference in the heights between Tatsuya and Mayumi had concealed what was actually going on — had been mistaken for something else.

"Kasumi-chan!?"



On the other hand, from the word, 'Onee-chan,' and the distinctive voice, Mayumi had understood that the remark was aimed at them. Mayumi turned toward the girl who was running to them and immediately looked back in Tatsuya's direction and vigorously took one step backwards. Clearly flustered, perhaps she had some kind of clue of how the girl had misunderstood the situation.

Tatsuya knew the girl called 'Kasumi-chan' was Mayumi's younger sister even without looking at the new student registry. If her cordial relationship with her male junior was misunderstood by her younger sister, then it was only natural for her to be flustered, thought Tatsuya. However, he felt that her response seemed to be a little too energetic.

His momentary concern did not turn into a needless anxiety. It was probably the high heels that led to the disaster. No, Mayumi should have had many chances to attend formal parties, so it probably wasn't that she was unused to shoes with high heels. So she had probably been careless with her footing when she moved unexpectedly.

Before Mayumi had tripped and fallen, Tatsuya had calmly considered the possibility. Completely from a bystander's point of view. If he could have just kept looking and been done with it, he probably would have accepted the label of 'heartless' without complaint, but as usual he was not so lacking in human feeling.

Mayumi, who had stumbled, was swiftly supported by Tatsuya. He had grabbed Mayumi's shoulders with both hands. He did not grasp her hip area in an overly familiar manner and of course he did not insolently accidentally touch her breasts.

"Ah, thank you…"

Therefore, Mayumi thanking him while looking embarrassed was simply because she was bothered by falling when there was nothing to trip over.

However, it seemed Mayumi's sister didn't think so.

"I said get away from her, right!"

Immediately after she screamed that. Mayumi's sister — Kasumi's body gently floated up. The petite body accelerated mid-air without forming a parabolic line, floating in a straight line with a knee protruding out to attack Tatsuya's face.

Tatsuya stopped that knee with one hand. He did not block it with his forearm — he caught it in his palm. Being high in the air adding to the power, the shock went up and the inertia fled to the ground.

Mayumi looked up at the spectacle with her eyes so open that they were perfect circles, but Kasumi was even more surprised than her sister. It was better than being blocked or knocked down, and if it was a ballet lift, it would have been praised exultantly. As her movement conditions were forcibly altered, Kasumi's Acceleration and Movement-type combination magic lost its effect.

Without the assistance of magic, the one knee above the palm posture was an unstable stance. As one should expect, Kasumi's balance was destroyed. Her petite body tilted violently.

Before she tipped over completely, Tatsuya released the body he caught by one leg and lowered his hand.

"Whoa!"

The shriek she raised could not be called very cute, as Kasumi fell in a pitched forward posture. If she made contact with the soft coat of the pavement of the front yard in this manner, then even if she didn't hit her head, she would probably be wounded on her palms and knees enough to cause bleeding. As a look for attending the entrance ceremony, it could be called a very pitiful one. That would be a very tough trial for a girl who had just barely become a high school student.

In order to prevent this tragedy, Tatsuya would have to catch Kasumi's body as it fell — which he did not. The reason was not that he didn't have enough time to react. His cold eyes pursued the process of the girl who had just become his junior falling down. The knowledge that she was Mayumi's sister did not have any significant impact on his decision making process. Although the attack had failed, the fact that the girl had launched an attack on him was more important and significant to Tatsuya. Besides, if he had caught this girl's body as she fell, he would have shown the other girl a hole in his defenses.

"Ah!?"

Tatsuya understood from observation why the girl raised her voice hysterically.

A Magic Sequence had pasted itself to the girl's body. Her falling speed slowed. A protective barrier of data fortification protected the girl's body so that neither the Eidos or the skin were damaged. Normally, this phenomenon wouldn't occur unless the magician applied the magic to his own body, but a third party had cast it.

As Kasumi landed gently undamaged, almost at the same time, Tatsuya made a big leap backward. Three meters in front of the space he vacated, a girl, who aside from her hair style looked exactly like Kasumi, with the same face and body type, rushed over to Kasumi, who was on both her knees.

"Kasumi-chan, are you okay!?"

"Izumi, you saved me. Thanks."

Side by side, they really were like two peas in a pod. Even a person unaware of their background information would probably conclude from looking at them that they were identical twins. Of course, Tatsuya knew the pair were indeed twins.

Saegusa Kasumi and Saegusa Izumi. Within the Numbered, the sisters were known, without irony or whimsy, as 'The Saegusa Twins'.

Even though their faces were identical, their auras differed greatly. From looking at Kasumi, who was emitting signs of aggression with her curl-less hair cut in a short hairstyle, she was probably very sports oriented; possibly she was some kind of martial arts practitioner. On the other hand, Izumi, who was clothed in a graceful, gentle aura, had straight hair cut to give her bangs reaching her eyebrows and hair that touched her shoulders evenly; perhaps she was a bookworm, as she looked like she might be an indoor type of girl. From her words just now as well as her tone and expression, he knew she was flustered, but somehow she did not seem all that nervous. —At least on the surface. However, Tatsuya felt that this was the one he should be more wary of.

It was somewhat rude for Tatsuya to stare at someone when it was their first meeting, but they were all doing it. They all had blatant looks in their eyes but Tatsuya's was indeed the most temperate.

"Izumi, this guy is strong for a playboy."

"Uh, umm, Kasumi-chan?"

Certainly, there was a clear difference between their mental states; although the probing looks they sent at him were the same, the flame of hostility was only burning in Kasumi's pupils.

"Calming down a little would be…"

Izumi was gently stroking Kasumi.

"My intuition is screaming. This guy, he's not ordinary."

Nonetheless, Kasumi was not listening to her advice. She glared up at Tatsuya on her knees, shifting her left sleeve and exposing her CAD.

"Izumi, we're doing that."

As she said that, Kasumi ran her fingers down the console of her CAD. She was using magic without authorization. Clearly an illegal act. Moreover, for the second time. Even bearing in mind it was directed at himself, it was not something he could turn a blind eye to. She was a new student getting ready for the entrance ceremony, but having said that, there was no way he couldn't arrest her.

In an instant, Tatsuya made that decision; fortunately, before he could act upon it, the illegal act of magic ended up being a mere attempt.

"Settle down!"

Mayumi, who had until then been too paralyzed to do anything about the situation, let her fist fall on top of Kasumi's head.

"…"

Kasumi did not cry out but based on the way she held her head, despite how she was trying to make it appear, that probably really hurt.

"…Onee-chan, why did you do that?"

"That's my line! Kasumi-chan, you, why did you do that!?"

Mayumi had both hands on her hips as she looked down at Kasumi, who was looking up at her sister's face with teary eyes. She was really incensed. Right away, Kasumi's agitated mind was cooled by her sister's threatening attitude, the color of her face changing from red to white.

"I've told you over and over again, 'The unauthorized use of magic is a crime!' To do this on the very day you entered high school… What on earth were you thinking!?"

Tatsuya watched, completely dumbfounded, as Mayumi talked on and on in a voice that was half an octave higher than usual. Seeing her flustered was not an unfamiliar sight. Nevertheless, this was the first time he'd seen her in a frenzy. This honest straightforwardness was not something he could have imagined from her, so different was it from the usual enigmatic smiling façade she used to conceal her real intentions.

On the other hand, Kasumi, who was being drenched in the display of rage, had not abandoned her resistance, although she had curled herself up. Because they were family? Or could it possibly be because she was used to it.

"B-But, that guy was doing something indecent to Onee-chan…"

The counterattack was certainly effective.

"Wha… in-indecent!?"

She did do some damage to her opponent in a sense.

"We were not doing anything like that! What were you thinking!?"

If you looked at the big picture though, all she had done was add fuel to the fire.

"After all that you said about you two being fine looking around before the doors opened without me sticking with you like you two were children, Kasumi-chan, you did this!? You didn't cause anyone else problems like you did just now, right!?"

I see, that was the reason, thought Tatsuya. Mayumi came here because she was escorting her sisters to the admissions ceremony instead of their busy parents.

"Onee-sama, that is absurd."

The one who disputed the reprimand of Mayumi's that had taken the form of a question was not Kasumi, whose body had begun quivering, but Izumi, who was snuggled next to her.

"Aside from Kasumi-chan's mistake just now, we have not done anything to cause problems for other people."

"I see… Izumi-chan, should I believe you?"

"I promise, there are no discrepancies."

Izumi's polite tone was a bit too polite as she proclaimed their innocence, which seemed to restore Mayumi's equanimity somewhat.

"Understood. …Tatsuya-kun, please forgive us!"

After seeing the affirmative in Izumi's eyes, Mayumi turned to Tatsuya and bowed deeply.

"My little sister did something outrageous. Kasumi-chan, you apologize to Tatsuya-kun as well!"

Perhaps she understood how serious her sister was; whatever she was feeling in her heart, Kasumi-chan wasn't displaying that defiant manner any more.

"I cannot excuse my behavior."

She lined up next to Mayumi and bravely lowered her head.

"I too offer my apologies. Shiba-senpai, please pardon Kasumi-chan's rudeness somehow."

Kasumi was not the only interested party; Izumi followed up after her elder sister.

Receiving a simultaneous apology from the three beautiful girls — no, one beautiful woman and two beautiful girls — made him feel ill at ease. Miraculously, there had been no witnesses to the use of power a little while ago, but now for some reason or other, he felt many suspicious gazes on them from here and there. If people mistakenly thought he was bullying the girls or something, then the damage of the aftermath would be worse than Kasumi's flying knee kick.

"Please raise your heads. No harm has been done, so please don't worry about it."

Is what he said, but 'please don't do this for my sake' was closer to what Tatsuya meant. In order to escape from the gazes of the gradually

increasing onlookers, he wanted to get away from this place as soon as possible. However, 'don't worry about it anymore' was not a pretense.

That was something Mayumi probably understood also. When she raised her head, she had a relieved look on her face. However, that look was soon replaced by a guilty one.

"Ah, umm, Tatsuya-kun."

"What is it?"

In response to her mood, which was somewhat strange for some reason, Tatsuya put his mind on alert.

"I know that… the incident just now is supposed to be reported to the staff room, but,"

As she faced Tatsuya, Mayumi closed her eyes and put both her hands together.

"Please! For my sake, won't you overlook this, please!?"

Oh, that's it, Tatsuya did not mutter this out loud.

"I do not intend to make a big deal out of something as minor as this."

Actually, if 'something as minor as this' was a problem, he didn't know how many times he and Miyuki would have been placed in protective custody. 'I don't want this talked about either' was Tatsuya's honest feeling.

"Thank you, Tatsuya-kun!"

So, he was troubled by the abundance of emotion. Besides...

"No, she intended to barely miss me from the start."

That flying knee kick had been what is known as a bluff. If she had been attacking him earnestly, Tatsuya wouldn't have made such a gentle response.

Kasumi had planned for the combination Acceleration and Movement magic she had applied to herself to be caught by the other magic she linked to it when her knee was thirty centimeters from Tatsuya's face, so rapid deceleration would be cast at the distance of ten centimeters when she would halt mid air. If she hadn't done so, not even Tatsuya would have grasped her knee with one hand. No matter how much he had been

trained, stopping a person who weighed forty kilograms and was accelerating at fifteen meters per second was impossible. Because he knew the point where the rapid deceleration started and the point where it was to halt, directly before the stopping point, he had literally forced termination by putting his hand there.

"Ha… I've come to expect that from you, Tatsuya-kun."

As a look of astonishment and a mutter of "How the…" came from Kasumi on her side, Mayumi nodded yes-yes with an impressed look on her face. For Mayumi, abnormalities like this from Tatsuya had become a normal thing.

"Senpai, I have the job of new student guidance, so I must go. The event site is already open."

To forestall Mayumi, who looked like she was going to say something unnecessary, Tatsuya made this announcement and quit the scene without waiting for a reply.

"Pixie."

After separating from the Saegusa sisters, in a place where there were few people, Tatsuya put a vocal transmission unit near his mouth.

(Yes, Master.)

The voice that replied in a soft whisper was an active form of telepathy. This was the response of 'Pixie' who was in the '3HType P-94'.

"Erase all the Psion sensor data from the records, from right now to ten minutes before now, for the area in front of the front yard entrance to the auditorium."

(As you wish.)

It seemed that Mayumi had carelessly forgotten, but Kasumi's use of magic without authorization could not be concealed merely by Tatsuya's silence. Everywhere inside the school grounds was covered with sensors to observe magic activity; aside from the exception of periods like the new club member invitation week, the unauthorized use of magic would be recorded by the sensors.

(Erasure completed.)

Naturally, Tatsuya had not gotten Pixie moved to the Student Council room simply to wait on tables. Since she was originally a housekeeping robot, he had let her do what she wanted, but Tatsuya's intention was entirely different. It was to hack the surveillance system inside the school.

If this was March, when Mayumi was still enrolled, then most of her usual requests would be accommodated. She had overcome the usual limits of the powers of the former Student Council presidents and retained the intervention codes for the surveillance system. Of course, she had not gotten them by honest means. Therefore, the Student Council president that followed her hadn't inherited them, of course.

Tatsuya, who had various dark spots in his background, needed a means to intervene in the surveillance system other than Mayumi. Then he cast his eyes on how Pixie was constructed.

Right now, Pixie was operating from within the humanoid home helper robot's electronic brain where her actual body was lodged, which she manipulated directly. In short, Pixie was concealing the ability to interface and seize electronic systems without an intermediary. This is what Tatsuya realized.

So Tatsuya spent most of spring break engrossed in teaching Pixie various hacking techniques. The techniques were ones he originally learned from the 'Electron Sorceress' Fujibayashi. The fruit of Tatsuya's labor was that within the limits of the First High School's private system, Pixie had learned how to freely infiltrate the surveillance system and overwrite the data.

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Although it was called new student guidance, it was not hard to figure out where the auditorium that was the site of the entrance ceremony was, and if you had a terminal equipped with an LPS (local positioning system) function, you couldn't get lost. Cases like Erika's last year where she didn't have a terminal so she didn't know where to go were the exception. Tatsuya and the others' job was not to guide new students; their main job was to provide a heads up to new students who looked like they were going to be late.

"Umm, excuse me Senpai. Which way is it to the auditorium?"

Therefore Tatsuya had not expected to encounter a genuinely lost new student.

The place was the tree-lined path between the library and small second gymnasium. The site for the entrance ceremony was on the opposite side. The male new student, with a puzzled look on his face that he'd seen looking hither and thither, had just called out to him; now it was up to him to reply to this sentence.

Nevertheless, the new student was very ostentatious, thought Tatsuya. Although, there were some students in his own grade who possessed red hair, blue eyes, black skin or other colors that were unlike the majority of Japanese people. However, they were not as radiantly hued as the slight male student standing before him.

The color of his hair was platinum. The color of his eyes was silver. The color of his skin was white. It wasn't just his coordinating colors. His facial features did not have any distinctive Japanese traits. Perhaps, his Nordic genes were expressed to a large extent. Come to think of it, Tatsuya perceived a resemblance to the new female teacher Sumisu (Smith).

"I'll guide you. Come with me."

Even though his mind was considering such things, Tatsuya did not delay giving an answer. As he said it, the new student bowed deeply with a relieved look.

"Thank you. Umm, I am Sumisu Kento."

"Sumisu?"

Tatsuya muttered without thinking, because the surname of the person he had been thinking about resembled the family name of the boy. However, Smith was one of the common names in English speaking countries. It could be a coincidence, reconsidered Tatsuya.

"Ah, yes, it is written with 'sumi,' the symbol in 'corner,' and 'su,' the symbol in 'counterattack,' and read as Sumisu. My parents emigrated from the States before I was born. At that time, Smith started being spelled with the symbols as Sumisu… is it a weird name?"

However, the boy Kento took it to mean that he was talking about the strangeness of the name. The way he tapered off toward the end might

mean he had experienced teasing in elementary and middle school over having Sumisu as a surname.

"No, I did not think it weird, even a bit."

Middle school and elementary students might practice what is called innocent and thoughtless cruelty. But Tatsuya would have nothing to do with foolishness like that. What he was considering was that if both his parents were immigrants, then it was natural that he couldn't see any physical traits that were distinctively Japanese.

"By the way."

More importantly, there was something else bothering Tatsuya.

"Sumisu-kun, doesn't your information terminal have an LPS function?"

When Tatsuya spotted the boy, he had been looking at both screens of his information terminal nearly in tears. If his information terminal was equipped with an LPS function then he should not be lost.

"Ah, please call me Kento. About the LPS… the function is attached, but,"

As he was speaking, Kento retrieved his rather large information terminal from his pocket. His height wasn't even up to Tatsuya's chest. One of his inherited traits must be having an extremely small stature. Height-wise, he would be classified with the shorter Japanese males of his own age. So perhaps because he thought it would be hard to see if he merely held it in his hand, he held it above his head when he pointed it toward Tatsuya.

The information terminal was an extremely old model. Tatsuya couldn't determine anything about it other than that it was old, but the model was at least twenty years old. And it wasn't a domestic brand. A type that had been constructed in the USNA and fairly common.

"I didn't have anything but a visual model terminal, so my father lent me the information terminal he used to use, but… it doesn't have standard LPS."

I see, thought Tatsuya. Since it was designed for an earlier version of the public infrastructure, it has low compatibility with the current version — no, that would be limited to domestic models.

Japan and the USNA process data by subtly different methods. Besides the USNA's LPS is at most a supplement of their GPS system, it is not an independent function like Japan's LPS.

"Let me see it."

Tatsuya reflexively checked the processing power and unused capacity of the terminal Kento handed him. It was an old model, but it had undergone various tune ups. Kento's father might be an electrical engineer. Deciding that it would be fine, Tatsuya linked Kento's terminal directly to his own by a wire and transferred the local position application.

"I've installed a school map that uses GPS. It is lower in speed than an LPS application, but it should serve you as a map guide."

He returned the terminal to Kento after the installation was completed.

"Thank you!"

Despite the fact that that was all he did, Kento looked at Tatsuya as if he had saved his life.

"Of course, it would be better to buy a replacement. After all, this is only a temporary fix."

He was giving out advice that did not need to be said because behind his poker face, Tatsuya was a little taken aback. He soon found out the reason for Kento's excessive response.

"Uh, umm, are you Shiba Tatsuya-senpai!?"

"Oh, that's true, you know of me?"

"Yes! I saw your activities in last years Nine Schools Competition!"

Tatsuya was not surprised at Kento's answer. Although it was in the Newcomers Division, he had played a leading role in the Monolith Code matches. On occasion, someone should probably remember his face from that.

That was what Tatsuya thought, but,

"Your tactics were incredible! Your tune ups were brilliant! I chose First High School because you would be my senpai here!"

He had been half right. Kento hadn't recognized him as an athlete but as an engineer.

"Until I saw last year's Nine Schools Competition, I intended to enroll in Fourth High School. Because, my practical skills are poor. But when I saw

Senpai's super technical skills, I decided that I absolutely had to go to the same school as Senpai!"

Listening to Kento's enthusiastic words made Tatsuya feel like he was hearing someone else being talked about.

"Right now, I am as you can see a Second Course student, but I'm determined to try to transfer into the same Magic Engineering Course as you Senpai, next year!"

"…I see; work hard. With such enthusiasm, you should be alright."

"Thank you!"

His interests were in a little different direction, but he was probably a male version of Honoka. Tatsuya was a little confused by the enthusiastic puppy dog eyes Kento used to stare at him.

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Kasumi and Izumi parted from Mayumi at the entrance to the auditorium and selected seats in a row close to the front. Kasumi took her seat first, but she didn't wait for Izumi to finish sitting down in her polite and elegant manner before turning to face her.

"Izumi, do you know that skirt-chasing boy from earlier?"

There were still twenty minutes until the entrance ceremony began. There were many new students who were chatting with their neighbors like the girls. In their midst, Izumi's posture said 'what's up' when her elder sister, who was the same age as herself, deliberately whispered to her, but she looked like she lost interest when she understood the meaning of Kasumi's question.

"Yes. …Could it be that you really didn't recognize him, Kasumi-chan?"

When Kasumi's face told her that Kasumi was asking the question in earnest, Izumi looked stunned.

"…Is he a famous person?"

"In a sense, he is."

Izumi sighed softly and moved her hips so she could sit facing Kasumi.

"His name is Shiba Tatsuya-senpai. Last year, he was in the Second Course, but this year he transferred into the Magic Engineering Course."

"Hmm… he transferred to the Magic Engineering Course from the Second Course so he's smart."

It wasn't that she was impressed, but she wasn't making light of it either; this weak response from Kasumi made Izumi's eyes say 'This is so annoying…'

"What?"

"It's nothing; certainly, he is smart, but… is it really right to assign him such a common label?"

Izumi deliberately put her hand to her cheek and posed as if confused. Her attitude made Kasumi petulant, but Kasumi knew letting Izumi get you irritated only made it easier for Izumi to manipulate you. With these twins, who had been together since they had been born, their 'inclinations and countermeasures' were exactly the same. Kasumi silently waited for Izumi to continue her comments.

"When he was a First Year — moreover a Second Course student — he participated in last year's Nine Schools Competition as an engineer. The athletes he was responsible for in the Newcomer's Division Girls' Speed Shooting and Icicle Destruction monopolized first to third place, took first and second place in the Newcomer's Division Mirage Bat, and took first place in the Main Division's Mirage Bat."

"No way… that means that the athletes in his care only lost to each other, so they were effectively invincible?"

"Yes."

"You're kidding…?"

"It's not a lie or a joke. That senpai produced the miraculous results as an engineer leading to the athletes in his charge to be called truly invincible."

While Izumi was in the middle of answering her question, Kasumi deliberately looked for signs that her leg was being pulled so she fixedly examined her younger twin's face. However, apparently Izumi was answering her seriously and what she was told next caused her to open her eyes even wider.

"He was employed as support staff in Onee-sama's Crowd Ball. Kasumi-chan, you were really unaware of this?"

Izumi had already lost her stunned look; rather, she was hitting Kasumi with a pitying look.

"I was completely unaware…"

"He was an emergency replacement, but Onee-sama didn't look hindered in any way."

Kasumi had a stricken look and was at a loss for words. Kasumi and Izumi had watched Mayumi's matches in last summer's Nine Schools competition together. In spite of that, she herself hadn't been aware of the existence of any would-be Casanovas cozying up to her elder sister, and only Izumi being aware of it gave her a shock.

"But I don't like it."

Izumi absentmindedly muttered while Kasumi was in a befuddled state.

"Onee-sama is letting her guard pretty far down around Shiba-senpai… he might ambush her when she least expects it."

This was all she said out loud. After her forceful monologue, Izumi sank into pensiveness while next to her, Kasumi still hadn't gotten over her shock.

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The entrance ceremony ended as planned without accidents. Takuma's speech had also ended without any special problems. All the eyes in the auditorium were not glued on him like the year before; like the year before last year, the students were too excited by being enrolled to pay much attention to it, an easy speech.

Afterwards was the traditional invitation to join the Student Council. The unwritten rule was that the discussion would take place after the admissions ceremony was over. Not for the reason that until the admissions ceremony was over, they weren't really students. It feels a little too formalized, but until now, there hadn't been any trouble with it. Despite the slight turmoil last year, none of the invitations had been refused up to now. However—

"I am sorry, but please accept my refusal."

This was Takuma's answer to Azusa's "Won't you please join the Student Council" invitation.

"…Is it alright to ask for a reason?"

Instead of Azusa, who was transfixed by the completely unexpected no, Isori, who was the only person who accompanied her, made the inquiry.

"I wish to devote all my attention to improving myself."

While staring back at Isori, looking directly into his eyes, Takuma answered thus.

"I want to be as strong as any Magician in the Ten Master Clans. That is my goal. So for extracurricular activities, instead of organizational management in the Student Council, I wish to devote myself to club activities."

The unhesitating reply had probably been prepared beforehand. In short, his decision was that firm. Persuading him would be difficult, thought Isori.

"I see…"

The owner of that despondent sounding voice was not Isori, but Azusa. Azusa had been released from her paralysis unexpectedly fast, but as she sighed, she feebly hung her head down. She had probably been quite shocked. At least, Isori thought so when he looked at her from the side.

"If that's how it is, then we can't force you to do it."

However, astonishingly, Azusa readily accepted Takuma's words.

"It is unfortunate for us, but if that is what you decided, Shippou-kun, please work hard at your club activities."

Her all too quick surrender was completely outside of Takuma's predictions. However, if he lingered here, the Student Council officers might think he had misgivings. Perhaps they might think he was counting on them to restrain him and believe he was only faking his refusal, this was what Takuma thought.

"Excuse me. I'm leaving."

The thought that there was a very high possibility that he might be 'over-thinking things' hurried him up, and Takuma left Azusa's presence very quickly.

While the pair of third years, Azusa and Isori, tried hard (and failed) to get Takuma to join the Student Council, the three second years, Tatsuya, Miyuki and Honoka, were also very busy.

Honoka was in charge of putting things in order after the admissions ceremony. Checking the presence or absence of the main guests, sorting congratulatory addresses, and so on, the delivery of the photographic data to the vendor and other things all had to be confirmed.

Tatsuya was in charge of giving directions to the second years who had been recruited to help. No one raised sullen protests over being ordered by Tatsuya, who was in the Second Course last year and was now wearing the eight petal gear emblem. He was reclaiming the armbands, headsets and other stuff now that their tasks were done.

And, as for Miyuki,

"My only regret about this year's admissions ceremony is that I didn't hear a speech from Shiba-kun."

"That would be impossible, Kouzuke-sensei. The only students who go up on the stage during the admissions ceremony are the Student Council president and the freshmen representative, after all."

"Hahaha, now that you mentioned it, that's right."

…She was surrounded by adults who made something over nothing, like this one, with a determinedly amiable smile on her face.

The profession of the man in the prime of life she called 'Kouzuke-sensei' was politician. As a member of the National Diet attached to the ruling political party based in Tokyo, if his party won the next election, then he was a young man with good prospects of securing a cabinet minister's post. He was known as a parliamentary member favorable to Magicians and he was also working as a supervisor on the non-school matters of the Magic University. In the present circumstances, when the forces hostile to magicians were gradually gaining influence, he was not a person either the Magic University or First High School could ignore.

Miyuki was well aware of this as well. That was why she had been putting up with his small talk with an amiable smile for a while now. Actually, this was not something a sixteen year old girl should be concerned with, but Miyuki was patiently enduring it. In the eyes of Congressman Kouzuke, specks of sexual awareness flickered. It was not strong enough to be linked to actual deed; men who were conscious of their waning physicality seem to instinctively long to embrace young beautiful women. However, even if it was only in his mind (it was not platonic), being eyed like that unmistakably makes a young girl feel unclean. Nonetheless, Miyuki endured that rude stare while pretending not to notice.

His long-windedness would become a problem for the staff soon. As long as a public official with his exalted status — even among the other VIPs — remained at the site, the staff couldn't leave the site either.

Actually, last year he wasn't this long winded. However, he hadn't suddenly decided he liked to make small talk this year. Last year and the year before, he had showed restraint due to Mayumi.

Not Mayumi as an individual, but to the name of Saegusa of the Ten Master Clans.

Congressman Kouzuke did not display friendliness to Magicians out of goodwill or a liking for them. He probably did 'like' Magicians, but what he liked were the advantages for his political activities he as a politician got from being an advocate for Magicians. Kouzuke and the Magicians were bound in a profitable relationship; for that reason, he showed deference when faced with the Ten Master Clans, who had exalted status among the Magicians.

If Miyuki's relationship with the Yotsuba had been obvious, Kouzuke would have made a stiff smile and quickly left the site. The Yotsuba name had even more impact than the Saegusa name. The political utility of the Saegusa name was higher, but the Yotsuba name incited much more fear in people with influence.

However, the 'family name' Miyuki was allowed to claim was 'Shiba,' not 'Yotsuba'. Besides, no matter how close she was to the limit of her patience, this was far too trivial a matter to rely on the power of the Yotsuba to resolve it. For her, the Yotsuba were not allies she could rely on unconditionally.

The one who saved Miyuki, who had almost no more ability to cope with her annoyance and irritation, was not a Yotsuba, but a Saegusa.

"Hello, Kouzuke-sensei."

Kouzuke turned his head toward the voice that suddenly called his name and the instant he registered the sight of Mayumi, clothed in her feminine suit and womanly smile, his face stiffened.

"You have graced us with your presence again this year. Thank you for always taking the time when you are so busy."

"Because this is an important day for the talented youths who must shoulder the burden of this nation's future. I believe it is more of an honor that I receive an invitation to this event every year."

In the presence of Mayumi, with her overly formal attitude and who spoke to him in a polite tone, Kouzuke quickly got the urge to flee. If he had been incapable of reading between the lines when Mayumi put an unnatural emphasis on 'so busy', then he wouldn't have become a candidate to become a Cabinet Minister in the government. Although insensitivity was pardonable, a politician couldn't function well if he was stupid.

"More importantly, why are you here Mayumi-kun? Are you escorting your sisters?"

Kouzuke asked that as he looked toward Kasumi and Izumi, who remained behind Mayumi. As he prepared to make his retreat, he offered a proper comment to ensure he didn't appear abnormal.

"Yes, because both our parents unfeelingly said that they couldn't take the time to do it right now."

"Hahaha, both of them are such busy people."

Kouzuke's amiable smile was a bit stiff.

"Kasumi-chan, Izumi-chan, say hello."

Without trying to make any more witticism, Mayumi looked back at her sisters.

"Kouzuke-sensei, we haven't seen you in so long."

"It has really been a long time hasn't it; there is no excuse for it."

The pair who had been silently holding back until addressed made their bows; Kasumi energetically, Izumi elegantly. Their stereotypical greetings offered Kouzuke a good opportunity.

"My, my, both of you have been busy studying for exams, right, so you should not be bothered by such a thing. Please do well in high school."

"Thank you, sensei."

"We will put all our efforts into it."

As Kasumi and Izumi once again lowered their heads, a pause in the atmosphere was created. Kouzuke did not miss this change.

"I expect great things from you two. And so, Mayumi-kun, it is about time for me to take my leave."

And with this simple goodbye, Kouzuke departed from that place.

Mayumi did not chase after his back as he left.

"Are you alright, Miyuki-san?"

"Yes. Thank you, Saegusa-senpai."

Mayumi spoke to her with a cheerful smile which Miyuki answered with a humble smile. This place still had the attention of the school staff. An all too clear display of sympathy would only cause them problems from Congressman Kouzuke.

For that reason, Miyuki had deliberately not given out any sign that would cause the school staff to show active concern. She hadn't been only behaving as if she wasn't really being taken advantage of. As long as it would not entangle Tatsuya, she wove a thin protective barrier on her skin of poly-paraphenylene terephthalamide (Product name- Kevlar).

Noticing that her bare face was underneath a see-through mask stronger than steel was difficult unless you had extremely discerning eyes. And there was no possibility of it being done by a high school girl that had just met her. Even if you were a direct descendant of the Ten Master Clans and were used to watching foxes and raccoons. Most people would undoubtedly only be able to see Miyuki's reserved expression as part of her embodiment as the ideal, refined, willowy, graceful Yamato Nadeshiko.

"Izumi-chan."

At least, that is how Izumi saw her. Izumi, who was in a daze, her mind and eyes stolen by Miyuki,

"Izumi, Izumi."

"Umm?"

When Kasumi, who was next to her, poked her knee, she finally became aware that Mayumi was talking to her.

"More than 'umm' is needed, right. Give Miyuki-san a proper hello."

Her eldest sister's words permeating her consciousness, a flustered Izumi directed her eyes forward. Before Izumi's eyes, Miyuki smiled gently with a slightly confused look on her face.

(Like a goddess…)

Of course, Izumi had not encountered an existence that could be called a 'goddess.' The words just naturally drifted into her mind as to how to describe the sight of Miyuki as reflected in the eyes of Izumi, who had separated from reality. As for calling her a beautiful girl, her eldest sister Mayumi was undisputedly in that caste, and although a stranger might think it narcissistic, Izumi thought Kasumi was pretty cute as well. However, this was the first time she had seen beauty at the level of the upperclassman with the ethereal smile, Izumi felt. Miyuki fit the imagined ideal of what Izumi 'wanted to become'.

"…Saegusa Izumi. Ah, would it be alright if I called you Miyuki-senpai?"

"Yes, I wouldn't mind."

Izumi's eyes were blurry with zeal, and her voice was a little thin. What has come over her so suddenly, thought Mayumi and Kasumi uneasily, aware of her abnormality, but Miyuki nodded without breaking her smile.

"Miyuki-senpai, I was so impressed by your efforts in the Nine Schools Competition. You were so splendid."

"Thank you."

Miyuki accepted Izumi's feverish gaze with the ease of an upperclassman.

"However, it is even more impressive to see you in person than it was to see you from the stands… you're so pretty."

"Uh, oh really?"

However, as the feverish gaze transcended admiration and started to be tinged with insanity, Miyuki naturally started wanting to withdraw.



"To attend the same institution as Miyuki-senpai… I am so thrilled."

"Izumi-chan, what in the world are you saying?"

Watching Izumi, who usually concealed her thoughts and feelings behind an unreadable, gentle smile, let her emotions run wild was enough to incite panic in Mayumi. Kasumi was already well aware of her younger twin's tendency to spout zealous words, so she merely watched with a stunned look.

"Miyuki-senpai… won't you become my Onee-sama?"

"Onee-sama!?"

"Hey, Izumi-chan! Calm down! Your Onee-chan is me!"

Both Miyuki and Mayumi were raising their voices. Izumi, who was the main instigator of the creation of this strange sight, was fixedly staring at Miyuki. Kasumi, who was next to her, frowned and turned away pretending that she didn't know them.

"I believe it would be impossible for you to become Miyuki-neesama's younger sister, Saegusa-san."

The one who threw a stone into this chaotic stalemated situation was Minami, who had been standing there eavesdropping near the four of them for a little while now.

"Minami-chan?"

Miyuki, who hadn't been aware that Minami had been waiting for her, intentionally put the implied question of "How long have you been here?" into the name she spoke; Minami postponed answering that question with her reply.

"But there is a possibility of becoming Tatsuya-niisama's sister-in-law. If Saegusa-san's Onee-sama married Tatsuya-niisama, then Saegusa-san would become Tatsuya-niisama's younger sister."

After she had finished giving her supplementary explanation to Izumi, she pivoted, turning to a person behind her.

"In this case, Tatsuya-niisama's actual younger sister, Miyuki-neesama, and Tatsuya-niisama's sister-in-law, Saegusa-san, could be called sisters, right?"

"Onii-sama!?"

The person Minami was directing her question to was, as Miyuki's raised voice indicated, Tatsuya.

"I am totally against it!"

However, Tatsuya could not answer Minami's question or respond to Miyuki's words. Because faster than he could open his mouth, Kasumi yelled an objection.

"I am absolutely against Onee-chan becoming Shiba-senpai's bride or anything like that!"

Kasumi, who had up until that point persisted in being a mere spectator, suddenly interposed herself between Tatsuya and Mayumi's line of sight; her back was to Mayumi as if she was trying to protect her as she confronted Tatsuya. Her meekness of a little while ago went some place else and she fully unleashed a "don't get close to Onee-chan" aura.

"Kasumi-chan, she was only speaking hypothetically…"

Because they were twins, they had sort of assigned roles; with Kasumi and Izumi, if one of them went into a frenzy, the other one's job was apparently to return that one to normal. Izumi, who had up until now been crushing on Miyuki, was suddenly serene and began to soothe Kasumi.

Mayumi applied pressure to her temples as she watched the pair. This was not just a pose, it seemed she really had a headache.

"Tatsuya-kun."

With her head cast down and her hand on her forehead, Mayumi called Tatsuya's name. Tatsuya tried to get nearer to her so that he would be at a distance at which they could hold a normal conversation; Kasumi stood glaring at him intimidatingly before him, blocking his way.

However, in the next instant.

"Fugya-!"

Kasumi raised a scream like a cat whose tail got stepped on and immediately held her head, cowering.

"Miyuki-san."

Behind Kasumi, Mayumi had swung her fist downward, her eyes still looking at the floor. The voice that sprung from her showed she was miserable all the way to her core.

"For my stupid sisters… I'm really sorry."

What could be seen of Mayumi's face as she was hanging her head was extremely red. She was probably really embarrassed. It wasn't as if that was something Tatsuya couldn't understand. Standing there all that time, her sisters going off the rails, even he probably wouldn't have been able to endure it any longer.

"Don't let it bother you. Right, Miyuki?"

"Yes. Senpai, please don't worry about it."

Tatsuya directed Miyuki to gloss this over, so Miyuki also cheerfully shook her head. Despite Izumi's disgraceful behavior and Kasumi's running amok, treating Tatsuya as a skirt chaser, Miyuki was in high spirits for some reason. Miyuki's attitude made Mayumi feel suspicious and uneasy, but right now she couldn't indulge in the luxury of pursuing the matter.

"I will surely make it up to you. —You two, we're leaving right now."

"Oooh! It hurts, Onee-chan!"

"Onee-sama, you're hurting me! Why are you treating me like this too?"

A hand on the nape of the neck of each twin, Mayumi departed like she was making an escape.

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On the route used to commute from the school entrance to the 'First High School' station, turning one corner takes one to the coffee shop 'Eine Brise" that Tatsuya and his friends like. Today also, on Tatsuya's way back from the ceremony, with a coffee in one hand, he was enjoying a chat in the café with Miyuki, Minami, Honoka, Shizuku, and Mikihiko.

After separating from the Saegusa sisters, Tatsuya and Miyuki had linked up with Azusa temporarily. However, Azusa had emphatically told them that it was alright to leave, so they came here on the way home with Honoka and the rest.

"Come to think of it, how did the invitation to the freshmen representative go?"

When Shizuku asked that, she unintentionally silenced the conversation. She hadn't meant anything by it — she hadn't asked the question out of gossipy curiosity. She was unprepared for the silence that her words caused.

"…He refused."

So when she was faced with the black cloud she suddenly cast over the table and the thoroughly crushed Honoka, Shizuku tasted bitter regret and wished she hadn't asked that question.

"Eh, Shippou-kun declined to join the Student Council?"

So Mikihiko's words, which gave his own curiosity precedence, could be called a fine move to get rid of the oppressive ambience.

"The person himself seems to have said he wants to devote himself to club activities. Nothing can be done if he has other things he wants to do."

Tatsuya's answer seemed to be more of a 'don't worry about it' to Honoka than an answer to Mikihiko's question.

"Yes. We can't coerce him."

Because he read Tatsuya or by mere chance, Mikihiko's follow up remark revived the mood enough that Honoka looked up and stopped looking so defeated.

"So it would be more productive to consider who to invite to join the Student Council instead of Shippou-kun."

Taking her cue from Tatsuya, Miyuki drew their friends completely away from the topic of Takuma.

"That's true. If you think of the consequences of a freshman not joining the Student Council, this is a bad situation."

Tatsuya nodded soberly and Miyuki lightly clapped her hands.

"I know. How about Minami-chan becoming a member of the Student Council?"

Minami, who until then has just been silently listening to the upperclassman talk, stiffened at Miyuki's suggestion.

"Miyuki, that's a little rough on Minami-chan."

However, faster than Minami could open her mouth, Tatsuya rejected Miyuki's idea.

"Because there is a tradition to the way the Student Council chooses successors, the substitute candidate must also be chosen by their score on the entrance exam."

Minami looked relieved. On the other hand, Miyuki did not look the least bit upset over the plan being rejected — she was smiling. Miyuki probably wasn't serious about having Minami join the Student Council; she was probably only teasing her a little.

"Who was the runner-up?"

Shizuku didn't bother speculating on Miyuki's state of mind and in response to Tatsuya, questioned Honoka, who as student council secretary had access to the exam results.

"Umm, Saegusa Izumi-san. Saegusa senpai's sister."

Honoka did not check her terminal; she had the exam results properly memorized.

"Third place is also Saegusa senpai's sister, Kasumi-chan. There's only a narrow margin between Shippou's first place and the pair's second and third. There's a huge gap between these three and fourth place"

Miyuki, who also knew the exam results like Honoka, offered supplemental information to Shizuku.

"So it wouldn't be strange if either of Saegusa-senpai's sisters became a Student Council officer?"

Mikihiko as usual spoke more formally to Miyuki.

"But going by the order, wouldn't it be Izumi-san?"

Mikihiko's attitude could be seen as suspicious or amusing, but Shizuku indifferently ignored it and made her objection.

Miyuki's face looked a little sour at Shizuku's words. The incident a little while ago had probably made her aware that she would not deal well with Izumi.

"The president will decide, but the first prerequisite is probably willingness."

Tatsuya also noticed the change in Miyuki's expression, but out of consideration for her privacy pretended like he might not be aware of it.

Mikihiko entered the room as Tatsuya was washing his hands in the restroom. There was no special significance to this. Their timing had probably overlapped by chance, thought Tatsuya as he prepared to leave.

"Tatsuya."

However, Mikihiko called out to stop him in a low gloomy voice.

"What? …Do you have something you don't want to talk about with the others there?"

"Yes… it's not something I want generally known?"

"Understood. I won't talk about it with the others."

Tatsuya's words relieved Mikihiko, who was a little stiff with indecision.

"Tatsuya, it would help to keep the conversation short."

"Since staying in here too long would be thought weird, I'm the one who has to ask Mikihiko to keep it short."

As Tatsuya said, they couldn't stay in here too long without someone becoming suspicious of their health. With that urging, Mikihiko rapidly opened up.

"Tatsuya, do you know if the new manager of Rozen's Japanese branch came to today's ceremony?"

It doesn't need saying that by Rozen, he meant 'Rozen Magicraft' which was a German magic technology company that was battling with 'Maximilian Devices' to become the top maker of CADs in the world. The manager of their Japanese branch would be a major important figure to the National Magic University as well as the magic high schools.

"I know. I managed to get by with a brief greeting."

Naturally, Tatsuya had known he had been invited and confirmed his attendance.

"Only briefly? At the after party for last year's Nine Schools Competition, the previous branch manager seemed to be quite interested in you."

"I was lucky today, because I didn't have time for that."

Tatsuya looked sour as he recalled that gloomy summer memory.

"So, what about the new Rozen branch manager?"

However, he soon returned to his "it doesn't matter" look and urged Mikihiko to continue.

"Do you remember the new branch manager's name?"

"Ernst Rozen, he seems to be a member of the Rozen's main family."

"That right. He's a bigwig — the trade journals were making much of it."

For an instant, the words were stuck in Mikihiko's throat, but he immediately threw off his hesitation and whispered in a low slightly desperate tone.

"And he is a cousin of Erika's mother."

Tatsuya's poker face didn't survive this explosive revelation.

"Erika's mother was a relative's of the Rozen?"

Both of his eyes showed surprise as Tatsuya asked that question. Mikihiko made a small but distinct nod to his request for confirmation of the information.

"It seems that Erika's mother's father eloped with a Japanese woman."

"Eloped, that's an old fashioned word."

"Well…"

Mikihiko smiled somewhat wryly at the surprise Tatsuya displayed at something that was off-topic. The somewhat complicated atmosphere cleared a little. As Mikihiko continued, his face looked as if his shoulders were less stiff.

"Because he shook off his parents' opposition and fled to Japan, they had severed ties with the main Rozen family. Her grandmother's — Erika's mother's mother's family — also apparently didn't approve of the couple's relationship, so it seems like Erika's mother had a tough time."

"It's a sad story, but what of it?"

Tatsuya thought it was a bad family situation, but Mikihiko's purpose wasn't to garner sympathy for Erika. Tatsuya was urging Mikihiko to get on to his main topic.

"…Since that incident, the Rozen main family doesn't have a good impression of Japan. Even though they have trade bases in Japan, none of the main family have been on the registry in the Japanese branch offices."

"Come to think of it, that's right."

As Mikihiko spoke, Tatsuya went through the registry of executives for the last ten years for Rozen Magicraft Japanese branch offices. Certainly, there were no Rozens listed.

"I may be over-thinking things, but… I feel that Ernst Rozen's trip to Japan has something to do with Erika."

Tatsuya also thought he might be over-thinking things. However, he was more concerned with why Mikihiko was telling him this.

"And what do you want me to do about this?"

"I don't actually have anything I want you to do. However, I wanted to share my concerns."

Faced with Tatsuya's suspicious eyes, Mikihiko smiled wryly to himself.

"No, it's not that… I involved Tatsuya because it was a little too heavy to keep to myself."

Mikihiko whispered in a self-deprecating way.

"It's a pitiful tale."

Tatsuya did not show any signs of evasion when he spoke his frank impression in front of Mikihiko.

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After Tatsuya left, Azusa remained in the Student Council room alone until just before the gate closed (Pixie was in suspended mode). Even though the admissions ceremony was over, there was still a huge pile of 'start of the new school year' work for the Student Council. So it wasn't strange for Student Council President Azusa to stay this late. If something could be called strange, it was the fact that the other Student Council members had left before her.

This wasn't because Azusa had wanted to do the work of five people by herself. Until a little while ago, she had merely been blankly staring at this month's schedule. Sometimes she sighed deeply, and shook her head 'no-no'. Those were the only times she turned to the terminal with a determined face and immediately relapsed to wasting time looking blankly at the monitor. For some time now, she had been repeating this behavior.

After who knows how many sighs, a change finally arrived. The electronic chime and the message display announcing the visitor's arrival notified her simultaneously. The screensaver on the camera was replaced by the image of Hattori. Azusa hurriedly manipulated the terminal and opened the door with a key.

"Pardon me. Nakajou… What? Are you alone?"

"Ah, yes. I wanted to ponder something alone for a while."

As she spoke, she conscientiously stood up and directed Hattori to take a seat.

After conscientiously bowing, Hattori sat in the chair she had offered.

"If you used your ID, Hattori-kun, you could have come in even without me using the key to open the door."

While saying that in a dejected tone, Azusa started to get the tea but Hattori stopped her with a gesture.

"I am no longer an officer of the Student Council. So, I must act like it."

"That's so like you, Hattori-kun."

Azusa chuckled a little and then returned to her own seat. She was a little surprised, but Hattori-kun was one of the few male students Azusa could talk to normally without using formal language.

"So what is it?"

"This year's freshmen representative."

Undoubtedly, one of Hattori's merits was that he didn't bother with any lighthearted phrases like "I came to see your face" or "is it alright to come without an errand".

However, this was also a trait that could undoubtedly be called a little too straightforward and lacking in tact.

"Shippou-kun…?"

Looking at the forced smile on Azusa's face, Hattori thought 'aw nuts,' but regrets are always too late. Beside, choosing to halt this conversation at this point wasn't part of his style.

"Ah… Shippou refused the student council's invitation, right?"

Azusa was well aware of this inflexible, over serious nature of Hattori. So she wasn't outraged or hurt about something of this level.

"Yes. He wants to improve himself with club activities."

"That seems to be the case. So, you decided to accept his prepared explanation, Nakajou?"

Hattori felt that being too worried about others' feelings was a bit rude, so he didn't mumble his question.

"Uh, did what?"

"Like the Student Council, Club Management needs to train an executive candidate chosen from among the freshmen. You are well aware of the need to fill Juumonji-senpai's place."

"People like Juumonji-senpai are exceptions among exceptions. I think Hattori-kun is doing fine, but…"

Hattori made a wry smile at Azusa's attempt to comfort him. There was no listlessness or self-deprecation leaking through that expression. Apparently Hattori wasn't depressed for any reason, which relieved Azusa.

"I too understand that he is an exception. And so it is necessary that I raise a leader sooner rather than later."

After listening to all he said so far, Azusa realized what he came here to talk about.

"Are you going to promote Shippou-kun to a candidate for successor?"

"Ah. Unfortunately, it will appear as if we snatched him from the student council, but…"

"It was after he already refused us, so I don't think you snatched him."

"Oh really. That's a relief."

Azusa smiled as she waved her hand; Hattori bowed in response.

"I said not to worry about it. Shippou-kun was already set on refusing us from the start and… oh yes!"

As she spoke, Azusa intentionally made a show of cheerfully clapping her hands together.

"Since you're already here, can I hear your opinion on something, Hattori-kun?"

"Opinion? My opinion on what?"

Azusa did not immediately answer Hattori's questions. She set the image shown on her personal computer to be displayed on the surface of the wall.

"The new student data?"

The freshmen's scores on the entrance exam by subject were included in their personal data.

"Shippou-kun ran away, but I think it would be very bad if a freshman didn't join the Student Council."

"So you have been worrying over who to invite to join instead of Shippou-kun?"

This was the exact same thing Tatsuya and his friends were talking about at Eine Brise. Worrying about the same thing in different places is clearly a futile thing but as is clear from the bird's eye view of the two events, it was

happening. Unmistakably, these type of overlapping events happen in the world.

"Yes, I am. I think any of them would be excellent…"

Azusa paused as she said that with a troubled look on her face but,

"It's not something you need to ponder so hard is it?"

Hattori dealt with the topic easily.

"If the top scorer refused the invitation, it's okay to choose the runner-up. The runner-up this year…"

However, as he went through the lineup of new students based on their exam results, Hattori cut off his words and his face stiffened.

"As I thought, one of Saegusa-senpai's sisters would be okay… Hattori-kun, what's wrong? You look pale?"

"No, it's nothing. Oh, yes, I think that would be best as well."

Hattori stood up as he spoke, made a hurried goodbye and left the Student Council room.

"Hattori-kun, what could have happened…?"

Azusa muttered that as she watched him leave. The reason Hattori's face had stiffened was unknown.

◊ ◊ ◊

AD 2096, April 10th. For the freshmen, this was the noon break of their third day.

Tatsuya faced Kasumi and Izumi in the Student Council room. Even though it was put that way, he was not the only one facing them because he was seated with his fellow Student Council officers.

He was hit with a sense of déjà vu over the situation. Spring of last year, on the same third day of school, Tatsuya had been called to this room. Of course, he was not the only one who had been invited and he had not been the main guest. His role had been nothing more than a supplement to

Miyuki. Due to some kind of error, he had been pressured to take up the mantle of a member of the Public Morals Committee.

Since that event, big unimaginable changes had been forced on his high school life. If he had not come to this room on that day, Tatsuya would probably be enjoying a peaceful high school life. At least, he himself thought so.

—People other than himself would have some doubts about agreeing with him on that.

The one who had invited Miyuki and Tatsuya at that time was Mayumi. And now, Tatsuya had become a member of the Student Council that had invited Mayumi's sisters. Maybe this is karma, was Tatsuya's slightly disjointed thought.

"So you wish to promote one of us to the position of Student Council officer, is that what you are saying?"

Tatsuya's mind was drawn back to this place by Izumi's words that touched on the main topic. Right across from him, Kasumi was glaring at Tatsuya as usual with eyes that seemed to growl. That was the reason Tatsuya has taken a break from reality.

"To be able to work together with Miyuki-senpai… it's like a dream."

He couldn't tell what Miyuki was thinking behind her iron wall of an amiable smile looking at Izumi, who had a hand on her cheek directly across from her. Kasumi, who was open in her hostility, and Izumi, who was open with her desires. Azusa, Isori, and Honoka were completely overwhelmed by the pair's strange attitudes. As a result, the roles of interacting with the pair fell to the targets of their hostility and lust, Tatsuya and Miyuki.

"If you wish, there is no problem with both of you working together."

He felt that there was something wrong with leaving the job of interacting with them to their targets, but he couldn't let his sister bear the full brunt of it alone. With that in mind, Tatsuya returned to the table. However,

"I have no intention of joining the Student Council."

His effort only elicited a brusque response from Kasumi. The way she phrased her answer showed her strong determination to reject Tatsuya. And the fact that her speech pattern was slightly different from how she

spoke to her sisters probably meant she was rejecting any form of familiarity between them.

"Kasumi-chan, you have been rude to Shiba-senpai for a while now."

As expected, Izumi could not ignore what was going on and spoke to her in a candidly needling tone — Izumi was clearly paying attention to Kasumi. The fact that she wasn't whispering might mean that giving excuses for each other's behavior was an aspect of their relationship.

On their side, Azusa, Isori, and Honoka could not conceal their surprise over the fact that Miyuki had said nothing. Her sisterly love for Tatsuya was practically a credo for her; it was normal for anyone who showed ill will to Tatsuya to be burned (frostbitten?) by her wrath. Despite that, the gaze Miyuki was directing toward Kasumi could be called a pleasant one. Rather than suspicious, the three of them found that terrifying. It was typically the calm before the storm.

Of course, Azusa and the rest were over-thinking it. Miyuki, who was attuned to any ill will directed against Tatsuya, completely understood that Kasumi did not despise her brother — her attitude was a mix of jealousy and wariness. Miyuki felt sympathetic to Kasumi's feelings of hostility to any male who came too close to her beloved older sister, and to Miyuki, since there was little chance of her developing a crush on Tatsuya, Kasumi was a cute junior she could associate with in a relaxed manner.

"I see, that's unfortunate."

By that Miyuki meant that it was unfortunate for Miyuki herself that Kasumi had decided not to join the Student Council.

"So then, Izumi-san, can we count on you to join the Student Council?"

However, Miyuki did not reveal any of her feelings about that or show that she wanted to keep her distance from Izumi; Miyuki just cheerfully asked the question.

"Happily."

Although the feverish gaze Izumi aimed at her grew gradually hotter, Miyuki's perfect ladylike smile did not falter.

◊ ◊ ◊

After school and after Kasumi wasted time in the library for a while, she went to the café alone. Thirty minutes still remained of the time she had to wait until she met with Izumi, who had gone to the Student Council earlier. The time seemed to be slightly longer than that as she waited alone. Izumi had told her that it was alright to leave first if she got tired of waiting, so what should I do, Kasumi mused lazily.

"What's wrong? You don't look okay, somehow."

Without warning, a voice addressed her. When she lifted her face, there was a young staff member in a pantsuit in front of her.

"Uh, no, I'm not ill or anything."

Kasumi had intended to indicate 'I want you to leave me alone' with that answer. However, her words were enunciated less clearly than she had planned, shocking even herself.

The female staff member offered a smile that seemed to see right through Kasumi's bewilderment and sat down across from Kasumi without asking. Kasumi was slightly taken aback by this unilateral maneuver, but as she looked at the somewhat disingenuous smile, she quickly decided it did not matter.

"I'm a counselor at this school, Ono Haruka."

"I'm Saegusa Kasumi, first year."

Haruka had aimed her self-introduction for the precise moment that the troubled look vanished from Kasumi's face and Kasumi had automatically given her name in return.

"Saegusa-san is in Class C, I believe?"

"Yes, that's right."

Because Haruka had stolen the initiative, Kasumi was following Haruka's lead.

"Class C isn't in my charge, but I'll listen to any worries you have."

"I'm not really worried about anything."

Her mental resistance didn't last long and Kasumi earnestly talked about how she had to spend too much time waiting for Izumi, who had joined the Student Council.

"I see. You have mixed feelings about it?"

Haruka, who had leaned forward to listen to Kasumi's tale with a serious face, offered those words in a whisper.

What do you mean by mixed, Kasumi thought suspiciously, but Haruka's words continued faster than Kasumi could question her.

"Saegusa-san, why don't you give the Public Morals Committee a try?"

For Kasumi, Haruka's suggestion was abrupt and completely unexpected. Haruka smiled agreeably as she peeked into the eyes of Kasumi, who couldn't make an immediate response.

"Do you know of our school's Public Morals Committee system?"

The question just now required a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer.

"Yes… I heard about it from my older sister."

Although Kasumi remained perplexed, she was still able to answer this question.

"Okay. Then I can make this quick."

Haruka did not ask who Kasumi's 'older sister' was. The family name of 'Saegusa' was both uncommon and well known so she knew who Kasumi's older sister was without asking; moreover, Haruka had known Kasumi's identity before she had introduced herself.

"Actually, the staff recommendation is one way to get on the committee. To make it short, we pick freshmen to fill the vacancies in the committee."

"You mean me? Excuse me, is it alright to unilaterally decide that right here?"

"If you were to accept it, no one would complain."

Haruka smiled slightly at the expected outburst from Kasumi, who had finally regained her vitality.

"I thought that you would be able to do work that would not be inferior to Shiba-kun's last year."

And this remark, spoken in a superficially casual manner, made the eyes of Kasumi, who until now was not really interested, change color.

"Shiba-senpai, do you mean the elder brother?"

"Yes."

For an instant, Haruka's face displayed a 'gotcha' look but Kasumi didn't notice.

"Last year, Shiba, who was recommended by the Student Council, stood out as a member of the Public Morals Committee as much as Chief Watanabe-san herself. The staff-recommended Morisaki is also remembered for his reliable battle skills, but it is undeniable that he was seen as somewhat overshadowed by Shiba-kun. Besides, last year, problems occurred with one of the other committee members recommended by the staff. If things like that continue a bit more, then people will look suspiciously at the staff. It would help us a lot if you would undertake this."

It might not have been necessary for Haruka to articulate two reasons. When she made the point about Tatsuya standing out, Kasumi was filled with a blend of fighting spirit and antagonism.

"I understand. Please let me do it!"

She was so enthused right now, she seemed to have flames behind her.

"…Thank you. I'll contact the Public Morals Chief. I think you might even be contacted by them tomorrow."

Since she knew that trouble had occurred before and after the admissions ceremony, Haruka had used that knowledge to incite her. However, she had been more stirred up by it than Haruka had predicted. What on earth had actually happened, Haruka could not help wondering.

Chapter 7

The freshmen representative deciding not to join the Student Council was an unthinkable event, but without any other fuss, First High School went into club recruitment week. (Azusa muttered something like 'this year, let there be peace…' which all the Second Year officers pretended not to hear.)

However, without exception each year, trouble to a greater or lesser extent (in this case, 'lesser' might be an unneeded adjective) occurred during new club member recruitment week, so there was no way it would end peacefully. The recruitment week started on the second Monday in April and went until Friday the thirteenth. Azusa's prayer of 'may we get through it this year without anything happening' was an impossible dream that would die a noble death.

On this day and every day prior to it, Tatsuya and Miyuki were on standby after school in the club affairs headquarters. That way they could respond instantly when trouble erupted. Last year, Mayumi and Hattori had occupied this position. Having two Student Council Vice Presidents was an irregular configuration and emptying the Student Council room of these two Vice Presidents might be perceived as presenting an easily destroyed battle formation, but doubting Miyuki's magic abilities was an indulgence no one dared attempt and Tatsuya's true strength had been proven beyond doubt in a different dimension than practical skills classes, which is actual practice (actual combat). If the siblings patrolled as an actual unit, whatever anyone actually thought beneath the surface, no one would oppose it.

In that room, they were on stand by with one of the executives of the club affairs' Public Safety Division. Since before Hattori's inauguration as Chairman, a system had been in place where each club sent one member to the Public Safety Division as needed, but since he had become Chairman, the regular system had undergone a change — the scale had expanded. All twenty members in a four shift rotation were stationed in their main office in a battle array; it was the largest force in school exceeding that of the Public Morals and the Student Council. Although he was undeniably inferior in terms of charisma to the previous Chairman, Katsuto, Hattori's abilities as an organizational manager were superior to his predecessor as shown by this action.

Yesterday, the headquarters was stuffed with Public Safety Division members. The members were almost entirely students Tatsuya hadn't had much contact with, including the Second Years. He didn't know much more than their names and faces. However, today there was a senior with whom he was more than vaguely familiar with.

"Nevertheless, it's quite strange. I, who clumsily caused an incident last year that nearly got me suspended, am now one of the people controlling the chaos this year."

"Senpai, is that something you should say about yourself?"

"Kirihara, please don't talk about that too much… I'd be troubled if someone came in and took it the wrong way."

Tatsuya's response had a 'shocked' tone, but Hattori really put on a show with his response: an elbow on the desk, fingers rubbing his forehead and sighing deeply.

"It's probably okay. Since no one's listening."

Currently, there were only four people in the club affairs room: Hattori, Kirihara, Tatsuya, and Miyuki. There were four members of the Public Safety Division on duty today, but two of them were making sure that the schedule for the use of the small gym for demonstrations was kept to by apparently going to watch them, and the other two had been patrolling around campus from the beginning.

"Oops, I jinxed it. We'll cut off this conversation here."

However, immediately after Kirihara claimed 'there's no one here', the third year female member of the Public Safety Force came back from the small gym.

"The Kendo club's demonstration has just started."

Behind the female student who was reporting on the status of the small gym to Hattori, Tatsuya checked the clock and, as ordered, changed the topic.

"Ah. Apparently the Kendo club is adhering to the time limit quite punctually."

Kirihara said this because many clubs went over their time limit for demonstrations.

"You're not going Senpai? You spent more hours practicing with the Kendo club in March."

"You're well informed…"

"I was in the Public Morals Committee last month. Occasionally, I would watch the practices."

"Just when… I was completely unaware of you."

The look Kirihara was sending Tatsuya was tinged with horror and fear. However, seeing Tatsuya's aloof face made Kirihara quickly unclench his shoulders. He recalled that it was all meaningless at this point.

"Certainly, I participated in the practices, but I didn't transfer to the Kendo club. The week after next, the Kendo club has a practice match."

As he spoke, Kirihara named the school that was the national high school champion.

"They are taking part."

"So, that's why you have been attending the Kendo club practices?"

"That's right. It's a good opportunity, I thought it shouldn't be wasted."

Tatsuya and Kirihara had met in close to the worst possible way, but now they were close enough to chat harmoniously like this.

However, a bulletin chime rang out on Hattori's desk, interrupting this calm interval.

The sound of the old fashioned bell signaled Hattori that a report had just been received by the mechanism in the desk. After a short call, he stood up and called over Tatsuya and Miyuki.

"Shiba, Shiba-san."

It was a complicated phrasing but this was Hattori's default way of addressing the pair.

"Yes?"

Miyuki answered in a calm voice. Tatsuya silently stood up and waited for Hattori's next words.

"Trouble has broken out at the Robot Research club's garage. Go arbitrate it."

Hattori looked at Tatsuya as he gave those directions. There was no deep meaning to it — Tatsuya was simply the easier person to give orders to.

"Understood."

This time, Tatsuya was the one to respond vocally. Miyuki showed her agreement with a bow and the pair went to the scene.

◊ ◊ ◊

Activities to recruit freshmen were limited to one week; afterward, they were limited to freshmen who voluntarily applied, which was the principal source of conflict between the clubs who took part in magic-based sports. Nevertheless, that definitely didn't mean clubs other than the sports clubs did not clash during recruitment week. Right now, in front of the garage the Robot Research Club used as a clubroom, the Robot Research Club and the Bike Club were glaring at each other with a single freshman caught between them.

The Bike Club was not a club for the purpose of riding bikes; their club's activities included making and remodeling bikes and were originally part of the Robot Research Club. It would be okay to say that the Robot Research Club had split on movement using legs and movement using wheels. Due to this background, the two clubs were normally at odds. The Bike Club, which rented a former car maintenance facility nearby, could be said to harbor more antagonism to its rival than the Robot Research Club, who had a garage on campus.

Both clubs had their eyes on an extremely eye catching freshman with platinum blonde hair, silver eyes and white skin. His slight physique and winsome facial features gave off an impression of cuteness to observers. He was a boy that stirred up desires to 'make him their mascot' in the second and third year girls. The third year girls of both clubs were standing in the front rows of those glaring at each other.

"Give up gracefully. Sumisu-kun said he would join the Robot Research club, right?"

The name of the freshman who had become the prize in their battle was Sumisu Kento. The freshman Tatsuya had found wandering around lost before the admissions ceremony.

"Haven't your ears gotten bad from using the press machine too much? Sumisu-kun hasn't said one word about that, right. Because we were the ones to talk to him first, your side has no cause to complain."

"We're not first come first served elementary students. Have you been shaken up like the old fashioned reciprocating engines you try to fix?"

"Old fashioned?! Those words are only to be expected from a cutting edge geek who is hooked on playing with life-sized mechanical dolls!"

A pretty large crowd of riffraff had been drawn to watch the unsightly mudslinging match between girls as spectators. However, the male club members hanging back behind the girls,

"Old-fashioned…?"

"Geek…?"

Got pretty revved up, apparently by those keywords.

"Uh, I…"

—The original cause of their conflict, Kento, was left in a lurch.

Right now, the mood was explosive. The first to arrive at the scene were not Student Council officers or Public Morals Committee members, they were the members of the Public Safety Division independently patrolling.

"The Robot Research Club and the Bike Club please calm down!"

The first to enter the breech was a member of the Public Safety Force, Tomitsuka Hagane, a Second Year student.

Taking a place next to him was Public Safety Trainee, Shippou Takuma.

For Shippou Takuma, who was apparently recruited by Hattori — or at least it looked that way — to join the Public Safety Division to which he had

enthusiastically agreed, this was his first assignment: to assist Tomitsuka in arbitrating any trouble between clubs they happened upon.

Takuma's vigor had pushed Kento out of the battle ring.

"Aren't you Kento?"

Then he met Tatsuya and Miyuki who had arrived just after Tomitsuka.

"Ah, Shiba-senpai."

Kento happily turned around to look at Tatsuya. He did not pay attention to Miyuki who was standing beside Tatsuya. This could be called extremely unusual. While he felt somewhat uncomfortable with Miyuki's deeply interested innocent gaze, Tatsuya questioned Kento.

"What happened?"

At this point, Tatsuya had no way of knowing that Kento had anything to do with starting the trouble that was going on before his eyes.

He had caught his eye and Tatsuya had spoken to him only because he actually knew him.

"Ah, um, I'm sorry, Senpai!"

Even if Kento suddenly apologized, Tatsuya had simply no way to know what was going on.

"I haven't decided which club to join yet, I intended to merely take a look around today, but since I went in to hear more about the club, it suddenly got like this afterwards…"

He was probably excited, and Kento's statement was almost completely incoherent. While Tatsuya was painstakingly working through that difficult to understand explanation, the situation underwent a new change.

"Public Morals Committee!"

Tatsuya heard a quarrelsome note in that familiar voice. The Robot Research Club and the Bike Club members were proclaiming their own righteousness in high pitched voices and Tomitsuka was raising his voice to be heard above them, so no one was really responding to the person who spoke.

"Eh? That's Kasumi-chan, Onii-sama."

"Ah…"

Tatsuya had not deigned to face the direction that screaming voice had come from, but that really didn't matter much. Even without Miyuki telling him, Tatsuya had recognized that Kasumi had identified herself as a member of the Public Morals Committee.

"Kento."

Kento, who had looked over his shoulder with wide eyes in the direction of Kasumi's excited voice, returned his attention to Tatsuya.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry."

"It's not really something you have to apologize for."

Tatsuya smiled slightly at Kento, who was so nervous it was almost pitiful. There was a thick layer of sniggering in that smile, but it only appeared like that to Miyuki at his side, who knew all his smiles. —The person it was directed at, Kento, didn't notice.

"Yes, I'm sor—ah."

"…Alright."

Before an awkward silence could descend over them, Tatsuya continued speaking.

"In short, the Bike Club misunderstood your intentions and the Robot Research Club managed to get tangled up in that?"

"Umm, yes, maybe…"

"I see… well, that part seems fine, now."

The quarrelsome voices they had heard earlier had been replaced with other voices. And they had not noticed the beginning of a dangerous interchange. There was still the threat of a magic fight starting in the air; while the Robot Research and Bike Club members were settling down, the source of that threat — was a confrontational Takuma and Kasumi, who were glaring at each other.

"Kento, it's alright for you to go. Leave talking to the Robot Research and Bike clubs to me."

While the thought of the underclassmen who had come here to arbitrate one incident starting one of their own made his head hurt, Tatsuya directed Kento to leave the area.

"Yes… Thank you."

Kento seemed a little hesitant about whether he could allow Tatsuya to settle the matter for him, but in the end, he made a bow to Tatsuya and obeyed his command.

"This matter is already being handled by the club affairs Public Safety Division. So you can leave already, Public Morals member."

This had been the first thing Takuma had said to start the dispute.

His arrogant way of speaking instantly made Kasumi flinch. However, when she recognized him as a fellow freshman, she indignantly spoke back to him.

"But I believe the Public Morals Committee has jurisdiction over disputes between students."

So there's no reason for me to just dolefully leave, Kasumi implicitly informed and tried to bypass Takuma.

"Hey, wait."

Takuma reached out to take hold of Kasumi's arm as she passed him. However, that hand wasn't able to grab hold of anything. Kasumi made a smooth sidestep and evaded Takuma's hand. Takuma was momentarily dumbfounded by his unthinkable failure to grab her; however, seeing Kasumi's triumphant look made his blood boil and rush all to his head.

Naturally, even Takuma was not so simple minded as to use that as an excuse for violence.

"Persistent aren't you. Can't you stop getting in the way?"

Nimbly going around Takuma who got in her way again, Kasumi spoke to him in a bored tone.

"I said we're taking care of things, Saegusa. Or can't you understand that, without me speaking more clearly? There's no reason for you to intervene."

"Hmm… Shippou-kun. You know who I am?"

Kasumi looked at Takuma with meaningful eyes and attempted to forestall him with words.

"Do you even notice when you're being treated as a hindrance? What a sorry state. You do know that Public Morals members don't have to obey the orders of the Public Safety Division."

Within Kasumi's slightly amused expression, only her eyes were glimmering with the light of battle.

"Saegusa… are you picking a fight?"

Takuma was the opposite with his red faced expression, only his eyes contained a cold light.

"I don't intend to pick a fight. But, I'm always ready to accept one."

"Oh… so you're ready to take me on?"

Takuma's left sleeve was tugged back slightly. Revealing the form of a bracelet style CAD. Officially, only members of the Student Council and Public Morals Committee were permitted to carry CADs on campus, so members of the Club Affairs Public Safety Division who were not members of those organizations were forbidden to carry them. However, some of the rules against carrying CADs were relaxed during club recruitment week. What glittered on his wrist was not a CAD with safety limits for use in competitions, but his personal one that was suitable for actual combat.



"I guess so, I'll do my best to give you more of a fight than you expect. Enough that you won't consider picking a fight with me again."

Kasumi also tugged back her left sleeve to reveal her left arm. It sat slightly higher on her wrist than Takuma's, it was on the small size and it was designed to look prettier, however the CAD within was a cutting edge model that was not in any way inferior.

"You don't seem to have anyone with you. You okay with doing it solo?"

"What? You want the excuse that you lost because it was two to one?"

Takuma and Kasumi were now already incapable of noticing anything but the adversary right before their eyes. Not even the fact that the dispute between the Robot Research Club and the Bike Club that they had come to arbitrate was now in the middle of a armistice or that Kento, the one who triggered their dispute, had already left the scene.

"Wait a minute!"

The dispute between the Robot Research and the Bike Clubs had drawn a big gallery of spectators. A male student suddenly intervened before they could have what looked like an inevitable and extremely public battle.

"Both of you, settle down!"

This was Tomitsuka who had been stunned by the malice Takuma and Kasumi had been invoking into the atmosphere until now.

"Senpai, please don't interfere."

"I said settle down, Shippou!"

"Tomitsuka-senpai, are you protecting Shippou-kun?"

"No way! Saegusa-san you settle down as well!"

…With Tomitsuka between them, the violent mood receded somewhat, but it didn't feel like they were done snarling at each other. Due to this, neither the Robot Research nor the Bike Club felt like bringing up the fact that the dispute that had brought them here hadn't been resolved yet.

"Everyone, isn't it time to go back to whatever you were doing?"

So, the voice that called out from the side made them feel like they had been graced with a proclamation from an angel (it was quite convenient).

"Do not make this incident a problem for the Student Council. I will be the one who talks to the Public Morals Committee and the Public Safety Division."

Tatsuya had followed after Miyuki with an assertion 'to not make this incident a problem', which meant that the Robot Research Club went back to the garage and the Bike Club went back to their tent to gradually resume recruitment. Tatsuya and Miyuki also went back to Club Affairs headquarters; all that remained was the gallery of onlookers and the three people who had garnered their attention: Takuma, Kasumi and Tomitsuka.

Chapter 8

"……And that's why it was so annoying."

"Ha..... I'm amazed you were able to hold back, Kasumi-chan."

The same day, during the evening of April 13th, AD 2096. It was only after the children finished dinner that they were informed that guests were coming (even though their two eldest brothers were not home yet), so Kasumi came to Izumi's room to complain about what had happened after school.

"Hm, well, when I thought about all the cleanup afterwards, I felt that it would be better not to throw down there. However, to be honest, I really wanted to kick his ass."

As she was sitting on the rug with her hands wrapped around a pillow, she socked the pillow two or three times probably because she was pretending that the offending item was Takuma.

"Speaking of which…… Based on your story, Shippou-kun's attitude was a little too unfriendly."

"That wasn't something cute like being unfriendly. He was blatantly picking a fight."

"Yes, yes. Then, since he was picking a fight, how did he explain the antagonism displayed by the Club Activities Group to the Public Moral Committee?"

"Yeah. That's why I said that guy was picking a fight against the Saegusa because he's a Shippou."

Hearing the suggestion from the seated Kasumi as she excitedly related what happened, Izumi did not see this as her personal feelings and reject it.

"Setting aside whether he's acting on behalf of the Shippou, it remains true that he has shown hostility."

Hearing Izumi's unexpected perspective, Kasumi threw the pillow down with both hands as she blinked several times.

"So it's not for the Shippou Family, but for his own personal grudge?"

"Can't believe you said grudge, Kasumi-chan…… Well, I guess that's close enough."

Seeing Kasumi's exaggerated display, Izumi nodded with a bewildered expression before putting on an expression of rapt attention as she thought to herself.

"I heard that the head of the Shippou Family is a moderate. Based on the rumors, he shouldn't be the type to do anything that directly antagonize the Saegusa Family……"

At the same time, the head of the Saegusa Family, Saegusa Koichi was preparing to welcome the scheduled guest.

"A pleasure to meet you. My name is Sawamura Maki."

"We have been waiting for you. I am the head's daughter, Mayumi. Please follow me."

The one who welcomed her was Mayumi. This was not a coincidence, as Koichi ordered Mayumi to lead the way. After leading Maki to the guest dining hall, Mayumi felt more suspicious than curious.

(This person should be the actress Sawamura Maki-san…… What business does an artist have with the Ten Master Clans……?)

If the visitor was a politician or an industrialist, Mayumi would not have found anything odd regardless of the visitor's gender. Even someone from the entertainment circle seeking the power of Magicians itself was not something out of place. However, employing the might of the Ten Master Clans on someone from the cream of the entertainment business was a mite too much.

"Otou-sama, I have brought Sawamura-san."

Despite how suspicious this was in her mind, none of this was reflected on her face. Perfectly playing the part of a refined daughter welcoming a guest, Mayumi led Maki to the dining hall where her father was waiting.

After allowing Mayumi to leave from the doorway and dismissing the maids in attendance, Koichi remained seated as he opened the conversation with Maki.

"This should be the second time we have met."

Adopting a similar seated posture, Maki smiled back.

"I am honored that you remember me."

"You're welcome. Please, enjoy yourself before the dinner gets cold."

A full array of appetizers and main entrees was set up on the table. The format intentionally avoided presenting one dish at a time because Koichi was aware that this was supposed to be a secret negotiation. Nor did Maki raise a fuss over this.

"Thank you very much. Then allow us to dine."

Accompanied by a somewhat suave answer, Maki picked up her utensils. Completely different from the slightly nervous tic in her manners, Maki's table manners were impeccable.

In Maki's eyes, Koichi seemed to smile in satisfaction upon seeing this.

"Ah, my apologies."

It was impossible to determine how to decipher that look – maybe because he wished to muddle the issue, Koichi opened his mouth to offer his apology.

"How rude of me to wear these glasses indoors."

"No, I am aware of the details surrounding your story."

When he was 14, Koichi was the victim of an international kidnapping incident that targeted Magicians, an incident that cost him his right eye in battle. Once he became an adult and his body's development halted he began using a false eye, though he was quite famous during his teenage years as the "Young Magician with the Eye Patch" among magic circles. Now, he preferred to use lightly colored glasses to help disguise the oddity of the false eye. Such details were easily available with a small amount of investigation.

After exchanging small talk and finishing the main entrees, Maki adopted a proper sitting posture. Personally, she wanted to talk about this in a more natural atmosphere, but she was unable to find any weaknesses in Koichi while they were dining.

"In reality, I asked to borrow some of your time today because there's something I wish to impart to you, Saegusa-sama."

Just as Mayumi finished changing and was about to relax a little, the speaker leading to the door rang out.

"Onee-sama, this is Izumi. May I speak with you?"

"Of course. Please do."

The words "please do" were actually the pass phrase. The voice recognition system from the HAR (Home Automation Robot) received Mayumi's voice and disengaged the lock. Entering the door were Izumi and Kasumi coming in together.

"Sorry, but there's something I would like your opinion on."

Hearing Izumi's request, Mayumi thought "Oh?". She did not say "please teach me" but "your opinion" instead. In other words, this was something unrelated to school studies or magic training.

"What is it?"

"Onee-san, do you know what kind of a person is the head of house for the Shippou Family?"

The first thing that ran across Mayumi's mind after hearing Kasumi's question was "Why would you ask such a thing?", but the answer immediately flashed through her mind.

"Kasumi-chan……"

Mayumi was well aware of how terrible her facial expression was right now without seeing her young sisters' reactions.

"W-What is it?"

Not only had her tone changed, even the eyes were wandering all over the place. Seeing Kasumi's reaction, Mayumi was even more certain that her instincts were correct.

"Something happened between you and Shippou-kun."

"How did you know that!?"

Kasumi didn't play dumb and immediately capitulated (more like confessed). No, she actually wanted to cover this, but Mayumi's overly decisive remark prompted a more honest reaction out of her.

"You……"

"Please wait, Onee-sama."

Seeing Mayumi set to deliver a tongue-lashing, Izumi quickly intervened from the side.

"It was true that Kasumi-chan almost got into a private duel with Shippou-kun, but the responsibility for today's incident lies more with Shippou-kun and not Kasumi-chan."

Mayumi searched Izumi with a suspicious gaze. However, Izumi's gaze never wavered. Mayumi gave a huge "Whew….." of relief as her expression relaxed.

"I understand. I believe you."

Hearing this, now it was Kasumi's turn to let out of a huge "Whew…..". The secret glance she darted at Izumi contained definite traces of "Thanks!".

"So that's why the two of you wanted to know about the personality of the Shippou Family's head."

Mayumi furrowed her brows as she adopted a considerate posture.

"True…… Though I have not spoken to him in length…… He should be a very practical and considerate person."

"Practical and considerate?"

Not comprehending, Izumi parroted back her words. "Practical and considerate" was too vague for personality analysis, so she didn't feel that they were characteristics.

"Indeed. Practical and considerate, so there's no way to tell what he's thinking on the inside. After preparing many strategies, he is not greedy for profits and will choose the one with the lowest risk, so long as the original costs are covered. That is the type of person he is."

Mayumi's answer came after she correctly assessed her sister's confusion, but this answer only served to arouse new questions from her sisters.

"But, if that's the case……"

"Yeah. As I thought, this seems like the complete opposite personality type from what Kasumi-chan saw from Shippou-kun."

"Then, in other words, he's not acting on behalf of the Shippou Family's plans?"

"Even so, there's only so much a high school student can plan for with their limited powers. Shippou-kun should be aware of how fruitless this is regardless of how high his magic power is."

"Does he have another backer besides the Shippou Family?"

"……Wouldn't that be too big of a stretch?"

Seeing the wild theories espoused by her sisters mushroom even further, Mayumi couldn't help but interrupt.

"……Ah ha, that's true."

"......Indeed, I think we're overthinking this."

The two of them smiled as they said this, but neither Kasumi nor Izumi seemed to honestly accept that in their hearts.

While Maki was speaking, Koichi never uttered a word to interrupt. When she finished, Koichi picked up a glass of red wine from the table. After consuming a quarter of the contents, he let out a soft sound before setting the glass back onto the table.

"In other words."

Finally, Koichi turned his gaze back to Maki.

"Your grandfather plans on breaking his secret agreement with the anti-magic faction, correct?"

In response to Koichi's leisurely phrased question, Maki decively nodded "yes".

"I also believe that the proclamations of anti-magic ideology are both unrealistic and harmful. Any aid extended towards that sort of thing would only become a noose around my own neck. My father is also well aware of that point."

"Thank you. You appear to be someone who can come to a logical conclusion."

Koichi slightly inclined his head and used his eyes to urge her onward.

"I believe the uses of magic should receive more evaluation from society. Not just in the military or the police force, I think that magic has a lot of potential in the areas of the media or entertainment."

"Media aside, you said entertainment? That is a novel idea."

"Please do not misunderstand, I do not view people who are Magicians as monkeys. I have no plans on turning magic into something that just draws attention."

"Ho?"

"Filming movies are often accompanied by danger. Furthermore, we are often troubled by the fact that SFX or special effects are unable to bring enough realism. Naturally, there's no need to speak of reporters, but both as actors and supporting staff, the value of magic is incalculable."

"……So?"

Koichi urged her on with high interest across his face.

"Even for Magicians who are treated poorly due to the fact that they are not combat capable, I firmly believe that there are many areas in the filming or media realm where they can display their talents."

"I see."

"I will invite the Magicians who never had the chance to prove themselves and give everyone a chance to wield such a wonderful talent like magic. For this, I will definitely prepare a reward that will prove most satisfactory for you."

Here, Maki broke off and peeked at Koichi's face. After sucking in a small breath, Maki's expression seemed to show her rallying her courage before speaking again to Koichi.

"From the Magicians' perspective, I am an outsider. I am neither a close friend nor am I affiliated in any way. However, I want to become a good neighbor, a close friend, to all Magicians. I earnestly hope you understand that."

"Which is why you have chosen to obstruct the ploy of the anti-magic camp?"

"I know very well that I am powerless, but at the very least, I feel that I need to present my sincerity."

"In return, you hope to be acknowledged and invited in by the Magicians, is that right?"

Koichi verbalized Maki's request, but Maki never faltered. This degree of perception was within her expectations.

"I am not so brazen as to hope to earn your approval…… I just hoped that you could acknowledge this, that's all."

Koichi gazed at Maki's face in slight interest.

"Sawamura-san, not only do you qualify to be an actress, you also have a certain talent as a negotiator."

Of course, Koichi was not praising Maki in the literal sense. In order to catch his true intent, Maki gathered all of her attention. Except in this case, there was no need.

"Still, you are too adept at hiding your true feelings. That is what is truly unfortunate. Depending on the time and location, revealing your true self at times is useful in drawing more concessions from your opponent."

Koichi easily revealed his trump card.

"There is no lie in your words. However, using Magicians as your pawns is not restricted to only entertainment. You are gathering Magicians as part of a plan to use them as a more direct power, are you not?"

Maki's face wavered greatly. Yet, that was only for an instant. Using her acting ability, she settled her rattled heart.

"Forgive my performance."

Even in Koichi's eyes, Maki appeared to be earnestly asking for forgiveness. In regards to earning brownie points here, Maki won a small victory.

"So long as you do not take action against Magicians affiliated with us, the Saegusa Family, I will not interfere with your plans."

Maki suddenly raised her downcast eyes.

"Truly?"

Now, her expression was beyond her control, but to none of her detriment.

"I promise you."

"Thank you very much!"

Personally, Maki knew she won this bet against herself. Though it was true that she lost while haggling with Saegusa Koichi, Maki had successfully removed the greatest unknown quantity that lay in the path of realizing the "new order" she envisioned.

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After seeing Maki off, Koichi returned to his own room, carefully locked the door, and trod towards the telephone. After pressing the call button, he waited for 10 seconds. The image that was displayed on the tabletop's small screen was the face of Elder Kudou.

"Mister, sorry for bothering you so late in the night."

Koichi didn't use "sensei" or "sir" and instead used "mister". This was the custom since his private tutelage with Yotsuba Maya and Yotsuba Miya under Elder Kudou.

"No worries. You must have something important to say?"

"Indeed. I have something of utmost importance to discuss with you."

Koichi said this as he gracefully extended his body towards the desk. On the camera, he looked like he was leaning in to discuss something private. In reality, what Koichi was about to discuss next was both a private conversation and a conspiracy.

"Actually, I just met with a member of the media."

Koichi first laid everything out and explained that humanists (anti-magic supporters) from the USNA were manipulating the media within the country to the detriment of Magicians.

"Based on what I heard today, progress on the media has gone quite far."

"Since it's you, obviously this isn't the first time you have heard about it. I thought you had already finished investigating everything about the media operation?"

Kudou asked without any hint of a smile.

"So you saw right through me."

Without any resistance, Koichi conceded Kudou's point.

Actually, Kudou was the one whose expression changed.

"I will listen to you for now."

Kudou asked with an exhausted expression.

"What are you planning to do?"

"The Yotsuba have grown too powerful. They have long surpassed the Ten Master Clans and are beginning to upset the balance of the country. Mister, don't you think so?"

At Kudou's inquiry, Koichi responded with something that appeared unrelated.

"You are planning to use the anti-magic supporters to chip away at the Yotsuba's power?"

However, Kudou seemed to correctly pinpoint what Koichi wanted to say. In short, this meant that Elder Kudou held the same concerns that Koichi did.

"At First High, there is a student who is closely connected to the 101st Battalion. A high school responsible for educating teenagers is connected to the military. Don't you think this would be a topic of vast interest to the media or politicians from the ethics wing?"

"Your daughters are also attending First High."

"In this situation, students would only be treated as victims."

"First High's principal is neutral…… Someone who refused to join your camp."

"Indeed, but that is only a minor detail. I care far more about the connection between the 101st Battalion and the Yotsuba."

Kudou's next reply came more than 10 seconds later.

"……So that is your goal."

"Not only that, but there is some speculation on that regard. So, how about this, Mister? So long as the negative activity is within acceptable parameters, I believe fervor for the anti-magic supporters will wane. In addition, the targets of their attacks are high school students, which if handled correctly, society's ire could be directed towards anti-magic ideology. I believe that this plan bears a certain degree of merit towards the Ten Master Clans."

"I do not have the power to approve of your plan. I never held the authority to do so."

"Even without authority, you still have influence."

"……I do not oppose your plan."

"That is more than sufficient. Thank you very much."

Koichi hung up the phone in satisfaction. Prior to the line going dead, the image of Kudou's expression was rather reflective of his age in that it held no dominance at all.

Chapter 9

AD 2096, April 14th, Saturday night. The name on top said this was the home of Shiba Tatsurou; actually this was the home of Tatsuya and Miyuki which was welcoming strange guests.

"This is Tatsuya-niisan's house?"

Ayako smilingly nodded yes to her younger brother who was standing at the entrance asking 'Isn't this too ordinary?' with his gaze.

"It's not as if I don't understand why you would ask that, but this is certainly it."

While these siblings were confirming it, the word ordinary was not a word readily applied to Tatsuya and his sister. An old western mansion in the middle of nowhere or a secret laboratory surrounded by high fences would be a much more appropriate place for him to live, and both siblings felt that was where he should live.

However, Ayako had received the map data directly from Hayama. There was no way it was false. While Fumiya controlled his feelings of disbelief, he pressed the gate post call bell.

"Yes, whom may I say is calling?"

The response was in a voice neither sibling had heard before. The Kuroba siblings had last heard the voices of Tatsuya and his sister on January 3rd of this year when the pair visited the main house to do the New Year's greeting. A full three months had passed but the siblings were confident that they would recognize the voices of Tatsuya and Miyuki.

"I am Kuroba Fumiya. I believe this is Shiba Tatsuya's residence."

Even so, the unknown voice did not make Fumiya pause and he gave his name as well as stating his errand. Some time passed until the next response, probably to ascertain what Tatsuya's wishes were. Since this was an unexpected visit without prior communication, it was fortunate that they apparently hadn't missed Tatsuya, thought Fumiya letting out a sigh of relief.

"Please enter."

The motor made a faint sound as the front gate unlocked. Fumiya pushed the gate with arabesque scrollwork. And then faster than he stepped on to the grounds, the front door opened. Within it a young girl in a black dress and a white apron appeared and directed a deep bow to the pair.

The siblings were led to the living room where only Tatsuya was waiting for them.

"Fumiya, Ayako-chan, it's been a while."

They didn't take offense over being greeted by Tatsuya who remained seated. Ayako seated herself directly across from Tatsuya. —Without being encouraged to sit.

"Nee-san!"

Fumiya properly remained standing politely and rebuked his sister's rudeness, but Ayako listened to it as if it had nothing to do with her.

No, it was not as if she was ignoring him. Immediately after Ayako sat down, she politely placed both hands on top of her skirt, looked straight ahead and bowed.

"Tatsuya-san, it's been so long since we've called on you. Please forgive us for the impoliteness of not taking the time to make an appointment with you beforehand."

"It is not necessary to bother about such a thing. We're second cousins, no, fellow kinsmen, furthermore fellow high school students. There's no need for appointments for a visit between high school students who are relatives."

"Thank you for your generosity. …Fumiya-san, what are doing? Quickly greet Tatsuya as well."

It was a somewhat insolent excuse. Nonetheless, Fumiya with his fundamentally serious nature was unable to ignore his own wrongdoing.

"Fumiya, you sit too. Such formality will make it impossible to talk."

Tatsuya smiled as he spoke those words to Fumiya who was standing stock still with emotions he did not understand. Upon Tatsuya urging him to sit, Fumiya somehow regained his calm and sat down next to Ayako as he was told to.

"Tatsuya-niisan, it's been a while."

Fumiya simply bowed his head. However, this was not due to his being reserved with Tatsuya or him looking down at Tatsuya or anything like that. Fumiya was simply nervous over meeting his second cousin that he respected and hadn't seen in about three months.

At nearly the same time as that, Miyuki and Minami entered the living room. Miyuki was empty handed but Minami carried a tray with tea for four.

"Ayako-san, Fumiya-kun, please have some tea."

Clad in a flare skirt that hit below the knee and prettily made up, Miyuki sat down next to Tatsuya. Miyuki, who had been wearing her usual at home attire, changed into her outside clothes to face their sudden guests.

"Miyuki-oneesama, pardon our intrusion."

Undaunted by Miyuki, Ayako deliberately stood up and politely bowed. Her classical wide flowing dress fluttered elegantly with her movements. His elder sister's display of her competitive spirit caused Fumiya to look away with a 'my head hurts' look on his face (by the way, Fumiya was dressed in normal male clothing and wasn't wearing a wig). Tatsuya watched the pair with amused eyes.

Just as Ayako sat down again, Minami placed the tea on the table.

"Please forgive us for coming so late at night…, but, tomorrow morning, we have to be back in Hamamatsu."

Fumiya broke the ice with his introductory remarks, at last calming the atmosphere.

"The hour is not so late that it can be called late at night."

Actually, the said late hour was just about after dinner would be finished. Nevertheless, the pair's late night visit did not feel troublesome. Fumiya and Ayako were the relatives closest to Tatsuya and Miyuki in age, and some of the very few relatives that they knew were not their enemies.

"Come to think of it, I haven't said it yet. Congratulations for getting into Fourth High School."

"With the abilities of you two, it's a natural outcome, though. Congratulations, Ayako-san, Fumiya-kun."

Taking her cue from Tatsuya's remarks, Miyuki offered her congratulations. It was well past the announcement of the exam results and it had been about a week since the admissions ceremony, but it had been about three months since they had direct contact.

"Thank you. Tatsuya-san, Miyuki-oneesama."

"Actually, I considered going to First High School, but-"

Ayako-san offered her thanks, and Fumiya followed after his sister with a pained smile that had more pain than smile.

"I was told that it wasn't good for too many of us to be in one place." (Fumiya)

"You made a request to Oba-sama?"

Ayako nodded in response to Miyuki's question.

"We didn't receive a reply from the honored clan leader directly, though."

"Her instructions were passed to father by Hayama-san, give up on First High School."

Whatever she actually felt, Ayako's face did not show any upset about it at all, but Fumiya appeared to regret it deeply.

"If Oba-ue forbade it, nothing can be done."

Tatsuya responded with a tone of generalized sympathy to comfort Fumiya and then casually changed the subject.

"By the way, why are you in Tokyo, today? Aren't you in charge of work in the Kanto region, Fumiya?"

When the word 'work' exited Tatsuya's mouth, Fumiya sat up like he remembered something.

"Actually, I have something to tell Tatsuya-niisan and Miyuki-san."

As he spoke his eyes flickered to Minami who was standing behind Miyuki awaiting her command.

"Don't worry about Minami."

Tatsuya answered the question in that gaze.

"This girl is Sakurai Minami. Miyuki's Guardian."

Both Ayako and Fumiya showed naked surprise at Tatsuya's added explanation.

"Eh, but Miyuki-san..."

"Tatsuya-san, did you quit being Miyuki onee-sama's Guardian?"

Tatsuya smiled and shook his head to Ayako's question which she had suddenly interrupted Fumiya to make.

"No, nothing like that. Oba-ue is probably considering various possibilities."

"So that's the way it is?"

Ayako examined Minami meaningfully, but Minami kept her eyes cast down and didn't show any special response.

"Understood. So there should be no problem with the girl staying."

Before the mood could become awkward, Fumiya resumed his explanation with an "Actually…".

"Currently, foreign anti-magician forces have been doing some kind of mass media operation."

Hearing those words, Miyuki just made an "Oh, my!" by widening her eyes slightly.

"From where?"

Tatsuya on the other hand did not show any surprise. At least, no changes could be seen from the outside.

"USNA's 'Humanism Agitators'."

Humanism has arbitrarily decided that magic is an unnatural power for humans, so the movement advocates the expulsion of magicians because it is part of their faith that heaven (or maybe God) has dictated that humans should only live with the natural abilities they have been granted.

"The so-called Humanism Agitators have already infiltrated the nation a long time ago or is that a different group?"

Humanism had widespread influence on the east coast of the North American continent, and even now the number of sympathizers within Japan could not be ignored.

"No, I think they are fundamentally the same. I don't believe that they have entered a new phase."

Tatsuya had grasped the 'foundation' of Humanism from a certain information source. He had not informed them, but the Yotsuba high command should also have a grasp on who was pulling Humanism's strings.

"So an anti-magician campaign using the media?"

Of course, he wasn't asking about that. That would be a confession that he was concealing information himself. Tatsuya switched his mind back to the matter presented in front of his eyes.

"It's not just the media. Diet members who are part of the opposition party are also secretly taking part."

Prompted by Tatsuya's question, Fumiya supplemented his own words.

"On the grounds of defending magicians' human rights, they are going to first criticize the use of magic in military affairs. Next, they will use the fact that forty percent of the graduates of the national magic university join the military as the basis to spin the fantasy that the magic education system and the military are colluding with each other, and in the third phase of what I recently learned is their plan, they will target First High School which sends the most graduates to the national magic university with an appeal, 'Save the children from being used by the military'."

Fumiya wet his throat with tea after his long explanation. When he looked up again, Tatsuya was giving him a look of praise.

The Kuroba family was a branch family of the Yotsuba clan that gathered intelligence. They did not limit themselves to magical means; they used a variety of information gathering methods such as wiretapping, hacking, and traditional human investigation. However, no matter how capable the people and equipment they are paired with, if you did not manage them well then you could not expose a plan concealed within isolated events. By

not confining himself to events that already happened, Fumiya had proven that he had mastered how to use the power of the Kuroba organization.

"Fumiya, you have done well to uncover this much, it's impressive."

"Um, no… Thank you, Niisan."

Fumiya who had spoken so much without stopping once had become temporarily incoherent. If you looked closely, you could see his face getting red. If you looked that closely it might seem as if Fumiya had somewhat unusual inclinations, but that would be a misunderstanding. Fumiya was simply happy.

"Fumiya really likes Tatsuya-san."

Nevertheless, right now Fumiya was with someone who was in the mood to tease him about it even though she understood that.

"Neesan! Don't say things that can be misconstrued!"

"Oh my, I'm mistaken? You don't like Tatsuya-san?"

"The way Neesan was putting it had a different meaning!"

"Hmm? I wonder what meaning you heard."

"That was…"

The thoughts of the trio watching the playful siblings — Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami — were in agreement on the point that 'the twins sure get along well', but the looks they displayed all showed different emotions: Tatsuya's smile had a bitterness to it, Miyuki's was amused and Minami's face was apathetic.

Ayako and Fumiya gave them more details after they informed them about the propaganda war First High School was facing then went to a hotel within the city. In the end, they did not reveal their information sources or their information gathering methods, but such things were closely held secrets. Tatsuya did not intend to criticize them for not being 'open'. He did not recommend to the pair 'It's late so you should stay here tonight' more than once, so they were both guilty of that.

Besides, even though they had heard nothing about the means or sources for acquiring the information, they understood. Fumiya's details had

included that Saegusa Koichi and Kudou Retsu were conspiring to do something.



Fumiya's and Ayako's intelligence gathering abilities were unmistakably impressive and the abilities of the Kuroba organization were probably the most preeminent in the Yotsuba clan. However, the head of the Saegusa clan was not someone they could easily put a tail on. If their opponent was Mayumi then even Ayako might have done it somehow, but Saegusa Koichi was still too much of an adversary for Fumiya and Ayako to take on. Perhaps, this could be intelligence their aunt procured by her unknown method.

—Tatsuya pondered that in bed in his own room lying with his hands folded behind his head on his pillow.

Believing that he might be dancing on the palm of Yotsuba Maya's hand was not a pleasant feeling, but there was no way he could ignore this. With First High School facing an attack from the media and the politicians under the influence of the anti-magicians in the near future of only a few weeks to less than a month away, knowing was more beneficial than not knowing. While he had these unsatisfactory thoughts, Tatsuya constructed a plan on how they must respond to this.

Chapter 10

The National Magic University was founded on the old Nerima Garrison. On the surface, this land was empty after the expansion of the Asaka Garrison absorbed the Nerima Garrison, however, approving the construction plan for the Magic University also played a part in combining the Nerima and Asaka Garrisons.

With this developmental process, the Magic University shared a close relationship with the military. At least 40% of the Magic University's graduates chose to pursue a career in the military or related to one. While there was somewhat of a misguided feeling here, once society's needs for Magicians were taken into account this ceased to feel unnatural. Precisely because of this, one would think that the atmosphere at the university was just as disciplined as that of a military academy – and just as rigid, which was not actually the case. For example, the dress code was entirely up to the students and even the more incredible or casual garb was excused so long as they did not infringe upon any morals. Any warning was only restricted to mutual warnings between students. In various areas, the sense of freedom was even greater here than the magic high schools. That was how Mayumi felt in the past half a month.

Speaking of which, today Mayumi was dressed in a soft, A-style dress that left the shoulders exposed with cardigan sweater with sleeves. The cardigan was thinly knit with large holes and while the dress ran to her knees, the lace only extended 15mm downwards, enough to allow her shins to peek out from the thin stockings. Her wardrobe was far more revealing than a high school uniform, but neither the students nor the faculty sent any disapproving gazes her way.

Currently, she had been asked to come to the buffet. Her presence had been requested by a male student who also happened to be a freshman at the Magic University. In spite of this, it was plain that there wasn't a hint of anxiety or excitement about her. As for the reason why, that was because the individual who invited Mayumi was someone she was well acquainted with.

Upon arriving at the café, Mayumi suddenly felt a little dizzy, and not because she was feeling unwell. The overwhelming amount of couples present gave a shock to her nervous system. Rather than being frivolous, Mayumi knew that they were all quite serious about their relationships, but that knowledge was little comfort to the single Mayumi. She too bore

dreams of love like any normal person. When seeing close couples, ideas like "envy" or "go away" would float across her mind. Naturally, she refused to acknowledge the fact that she would think this way and didn't plan on any self-reflection, just like most people.

There was also the possibility that this feeling was amplified because the person she was contacting today was in no way, shape or form related to love. In reality, he wasn't wholly unrelated, but on some level, such a close proximity caused Mayumi to unconsciously expel this possibility beyond her sight.

"Juumonji-kun, sorry for the wait."

The moment Mayumi opened her mouth to speak, many eyes were drawn to her table. At the Magic University, no one was ignorant of the meaning behind the name "Juumonji", though many did not know him personally. The expression that graced many an onlooker's face signified "so that's Juumonji".

"Hardly, I just arrived 5 minutes ago."

He didn't just arrive, but was here a mere 5 minutes before. Mayumi smiled a bit at these words that were just like Katsuto's style.

"My apologies for specifically calling you here, Saegusa-san."

With Katsuto's response, the number of prying eyes grew even more. Sensible students who had not turned their heads at the name "Juumonji" were unable to sit still when the "Saegusa" name dropped. This year, practically every student knew that Mayumi was attending the Magic University. So long as they were not hermits who renounced the world, no one could ignore the news that Saegusa Mayumi was attending, regardless of gender. –Furthermore, it does need to be said that the male students cared a whole lot more.

As for Mayumi, she ignored the dozens of stares sent her way as if it was perfectly natural as she sat across from her guest.

"Pay it no heed. Juumonji-kun isn't the type of person to call me if there wasn't something important to discuss, right?"

Mayumi laughed lightly as she caught Katsuto's gaze.

"Also, in such a populous place too."

Mayumi knew of the rumors that cast her as one of the potential marriage candidates for Katsuto. On the surface, their relationship was definitely not what people on the outside believed it to be. In fact, people more in the know about Magicians would actually find that rumor to be preposterous. In truth, the Saegusa and Juumonji Families had discussed this matter. Currently, when compared to the Juumonji Family, it was the Itsuwa Family with their 20-year old head of house that seemed more welcoming to that idea. Setting aside the Juumonji Family for the moment, the Saegusa Family had no plans to put in motion any real union between Mayumi and Katsuto, but the rumors would be correct in terms of the word "candidate".

Mayumi's mischievous allusion "in such a populous place" meant that they were feeding the rumor mill. Mayumi was joking of course, but if asked, she would be hard pressed to deny that she never had such an inkling. Once she became a potential candidate for marriage, it was hard to remain just friends even with the person currently in 2nd place.

"I feel that this is far better than intentionally going somewhere no one visits."

This response could initially be interpreted as "gentlemanly", but was actually an "obtuse" reply, causing Mayumi to feel that she was the only one who cared. Katsuto wore a casual suit without a tie or any other articles of fashion, so it was easy to tell at first glance that this thought never crossed his mind even at this point. Still, once she thought about such peaceful things, she could only notice the news article flittering across Katsuto's palm.

"……What an irritating topic."

On the table, the electronic newspaper was headlined with topics such as "truth behind Military Magicians", "JSDF using youths as weapons", "JSDF dominated by Magicians", and "preferential treatment for magic officers". Extremists on both sides were either blaming the JSDF for using the Magicians or covering for Magicians, but both sides were similar in that they censured the connection between the JSDF and Magicians.

"While pretending to act as civil rights advocates for Magicians, they are actually trying to discriminate Magicians from society. Don't you think such hypocritical news is incredibly vile?"

Katsuto didn't respond to Mayumi's complaints and smoothly began operating the cellphone-shaped CAD he removed from his belt.

Carrying CADs was not forbidden on the Magic University's campus and the standards around magic use were also more relaxed when compared to the streets. Especially dangerous magic was blacklisted and prohibited from use in the labs and experimental offices, while a large number of magic was allowed in general areas that had nothing to do with research labs or experimental rooms. Right now, the soundproof area of effect magic that Katsuto was constructing was also allowed on school grounds.

"Is it something that important?"

Needless to say, a soundproof barrier was needed for private talks, but there was no secret between Mayumi and Katsuto that they feared would be overheard. Even so, a quick glance at Katsuto's expression confirmed that the subject matter was not something that could be solved by normal conversation.

"Since the beginning of the week, anti-magic sentiment has been on the rise in the news."

As he said this, Katsuto used the filter on the electronic newspaper to display the articles he was talking about.

"I concur."

Katsuto eyed Mayumi as she replied back with a serious expression.

"And, what of it?"

Seeing those serious eyes that could appropriately be described as solemn, Mayumi asked without any attempt at a joking manner.

"The reason why the media has taken two stances is because each has a different sponsor."

"So there are two forces behind them?"

"As you know, we, the Juumonji Family, are not adept at gathering intelligence."

Katsuto didn't directly respond to Mayumi's question, but his words hinted that what he was about to say next was the result of the investigation from the Juumonji Family.

"I have no concrete proof for what I'm about to say, but neither is it entirely groundless. I pray that you will remain calm and listen to me."

"Of course. Let's hear it."

Realizing that this was not going to be a pleasant topic for her, Mayumi subconsciously straightened herself.

"Of the two dialogues, the backers of the group blaming the JSDF might very well be the Saegusa Family."

"Wha……!"

However, the news that came from Katsuto's mouth surpassed Mayumi's tolerance level.

"There may be other conspirators as well, but at the very least, the Saegusa Family plays a large role."

"That's impossible!"

Mayumi slammed her hands on the table and jumped to her feet. Thanks to the soundproof barrier, no one was able to hear her voice from the outside, but that magic was unable to block the light, so Mayumi's sudden elevation to her feet drew a lot of stares from across the café. Seeing the astounded looks coming from all around her, Mayumi sat down in shame. Nonetheless, Mayumi raised her eyes after taking a seat and stared directly at Katsuto.

"It's true that my father is a strategist who likes to plot behind the scenes, so it is true that even as his daughter, I am not always aware of what he's doing."

Her eyes were burning with a flame that was enough to repel the pressure of Katsuto's gaze.

"Yet, no matter what the reason, he will never forget his duty as a member of the Ten Master Clans. He definitely wouldn't do something that would bring misfortune to the Japanese magical community."

After receiving Mayumi's heated words, Katsuto quietly replied back.

"Then, Saegusa-sama must believe that this must be beneficial to the Japanese magical community."

There was the sound of a heavy weight dropping and reverberating in the depths of her consciousness.

"Don't be ridiculous. Everything they talk about will end with……"

As she said this, Mayumi pointed at the news article on the table surface.

"A better world where Magicians have disappeared. Did you think that this blatantly obvious jibe at protecting the human rights of Magicians would be enough to fool my father? Even if it's Juumonji-kun, I cannot ignore this level of slander."

"I never planned to offend."

Katsuto's reply to Mayumi, who stood there with her teeth clenched in fury, was devoid of any excuses. Feeling the powerful confidence behind his attitude, Mayumi's head slightly cooled down.

"So you're saying that above the discrimination against Magicians, there is an ulterior motive in action?"

"As to what that is exactly, I have no idea. The only thing I do know is that Saegusa-sama appears to be engaged in media activity that runs counter to the Ten Master Clans."

Mayumi pinned Katsuto with a particularly fierce gaze.

That gaze failed to conjure any faltering in Katsuto's eyes.

"……Fine then, Katsuto-kun. Do you have any plans tonight?"

"No."

"Then please come to my house. Whether it is truly as Juumonji-kun said, I hope you will make your decision after directly asking my father."

"I understand. In doing this, you actually help me quite a bit."

◊ ◊ ◊

Even if they were the Ten Master Clans that represented Japanese Magicians, that did not meant that they were famous lineages that went back several hundred years. Normally, visiting the home of a college friend did not require a specific appointment with the family. However, Katsuto

and Mayumi had come today specifically to see the head of the Saegusa Family, Saegusa Koichi. As the acting head of the Juumonji-Family, Katsuto's request to see Koichi was granted after setting 8pm in the evening as the designated time.

Wednesday, April 18th, 7:59pm. A pitch black limousine stopped before the threshold of the Saegusa household. From the backseat, a giant of a young man dressed in a formal suit with a tie opened the door himself and disembarked. The reason why the young man appeared colossal was the overwhelming personality he carried that did not befit his age. A special existence even among students who graduated from high school recently, he was the acting head of the Juumonji Family, Juumonji Katsuto.

The one who greeted him was the eldest daughter in the Saegusa Family, Saegusa Mayumi. Wearing a darkly colored formal gown that extended to her ankles, Mayumi curtseyed to Katsuto before showing him the way. At precisely 8pm, Katsuto set foot in the Saegusa household.

"Your investigation was very thorough."

After conversing with Katsuto in the guest room, Saegusa Koichi readily admitted to the inquiry regarding whether he was one of the backers behind the anti-Magician media inciters.

"Otou-sama! What have you done!?"

Faced with her brazen father nodding his head, Mayumi furiously reprimanded him.

"Relax, Mayumi. Why are you so excited?"

Earnestly tilting his head at his daughter's vibrant reaction, Koichi calmly scolded Mayumi.

"How can you tell me to relax!? What Otou-sama has done is blatant betrayal to the Ten Master Clans, no, to the Japanese magic community as a whole!"

Perfectly calm, Koichi easily took in the stern gaze leveled at him by his own daughter, who had leaped from her seat on the sofa.

"This is no betrayal. Mayumi, you're thinking in the wrong direction."

"What is—"

"Saegusa."

Mayumi wanted to keep pressing her father, but was halted by the still seated Katsuto by her side. Recalling that they were not the only two people sitting here, Mayumi reluctantly closed her mouth and took a seat.

"Saegusa-san."

Sensing that Mayumi had regained her composure, Katsuto looked towards Koichi.

"I do not know what you are thinking, so I hope you are willing to explain yourself."

Koichi slightly bent forward at the waist to look upon Katsuto.

"Is this a request from the Juumonji Family?"

"As a question leveled by the Juumonji Family."

Koichi allowed his forward posture to relax along the back of the seat before lightly heaving a long sigh.

"As we are both of the Ten Master Clans, I will honestly answer the question the Juumonji Family has for the Saegusa Family."

Koichi adopted the same proper posture, devoid of panic, that Katsuto had.

"First, in order to dispel any misconceptions, I will first declare that this propaganda was started by foreign anti-magic forces. Not only have they provided information to the media, they have made funds available as well."

"In the form of investing in the media?"

"The reasons may be as donations or marketing, though the ostensible purpose can be whatever they deem fit."

In regards to the question Katsuto posed, Koichi serenely replied back in full confidence. In terms of acting behind the scenes, Koichi was far above Katsuto. Katsuto also realized that there was no point in asking about unnecessary details.

"So Saegusa-sama intervened in the media as a countermeasure?"

"Katsuto-kun, do you know the most effective way to counter 'public opinion'?"

At Koichi suddenly adopting a pedantic tone, Katsuto showed no hint of answering. He was aware that Koichi's question was rhetorical.

"In the first place, 'public opinion' is both an opinion and a judgment. That is, something that someone said and someone accepted. Opinion belongs to the one who came up with it, just as the originator must bear the responsibility."

There was no way to tell whether Koichi's change in tone was intentional. The difference in age between Koichi and Katsuto, the head of house for one of the Ten Master Clans and the acting head who was only the son of the current head. Taking into account all these differences, Koichi's tone was not lecturing, but more of a natural turn of events.

"Once the 'source' behind the opinion is known, then refuting it becomes easy. Direct your questions towards that individual, find the gaps in their logic, and cause them to acknowledge their error. There is also the possibility of a compromise where both sides point out the lacking areas lurking in each other's arguments."

This was why Mayumi was the only one who wore a furious expression at Koichi's high and mighty tone whereas Katsuto didn't find anything out of place.

"This is why refuting 'public opinion' is so difficult. If pressed for a reason, it is because there is no opponent to counter when it comes to public opinion."

This was the same even though Katsuto found Koichi's words to be quite tedious.

"Even if public opinion is just an opinion, the moment someone says it, their advantages and disadvantages become revealed. However, the ones who came up with this opinion are 'citizens' and the ones who hide behind this 'public opinion' never take the stage. The media only reflects the citizens' wishes, activists present the citizens' demands, and politicians open their mouths to adhere to their citizens' opinions. When someone says it, their stance and purpose become revealed. Nevertheless, under unclear circumstances, acting as the spokesperson of public opinion and

describing the opinions of the originator grants them immunity to the duty of taking any hits."

Still, Katsuto began to suspect Koichi's true intent after he beat around the bush so long.

"Public opinion also contains a side that benefits whoever strikes first."

There was a possibility that Katsuto's dire view of Koichi was painted all over his face. Koichi smiled slightly as his tone returned to a more polite, gentle one.

"The first public opinion to achieve majority becomes justice at that time and place to bring pressure on the dissenters. Even if the dissenters have logic on their side, even if public opinion is rife with childish holes, logic is unable to stand against a flawed public opinion. As for the reason why, that is because public opinion is not equipped with someone to hold a discussion with, so no discourse could be reached."

"So you're saying that the anti-magic supporters are 'striking first', Otou-sama?"

Mayumi wore a displeased look while obediently listening to all this before finally interjecting in an agitated voice.

"The seeds of anti-magic sentiment were sown over a year ago. They saw through the fact that we were unable to act against them on that stage."

Casually handling his daughter's impulsivity, Koichi immediately turned his eyes back to Katsuto.

"Countering public opinion would achieve little. So, Katsuto-kun, how would you act against public opinion?"

"Scattering their opinion would do."

Without puzzling over it or being overly theatrical, Katsuto replied back in a frank manner. Even if it wasn't him, anyone reared to carry the burdens of the Ten Master Clans would logically arrive at an answer. This was not the only answer nor the absolute answer, but a possibly correct answer.

"Correct."

Everyone knew that this was not the one true answer, though Koichi continued to lecture.

"Simply agreeing with the basics of the aforementioned public opinion removes the possibility of being hunted as an infidel. Then, small differences in dogma will easily cause public opinion to unravel. A scattered public opinion will then lose its momentum and ultimately become forgotten. So long as there is no one who holds the course, of course."

"Doesn't that run counter to Saegusa-sama's definition of public opinion?"

Hearing Katsuto's point, Koichi smiled in satisfaction before nodding.

"It is as you have said, Katsuto-kun. So long as he continues to obscure himself, there is no way to maintain public opinion's lost momentum. Even if he continues to hide himself, once he tries to reignite the flames of public opinion, the citizens will see through him and bite back. That's because the public contains the foolishness to be manipulated once, but the wisdom to prevent the same trick from succeeding twice."

"So that's why you intentionally changed the direction of the public's ire while conducting anti-magic propaganda."

"That's just a vent, Katsuto-kun. There is nothing we can do about people with no talent being jealous of those who have talent. That is the same when it comes to magic. Trying to suppress aroused envy even once with whips or candy is impossible. The only thing that can be done is to allow them to vent somewhere. Before they coalesce into an inferno, scattering the sparks into numerous small fires is a much easier way to prevent a catastrophe."

Koichi finally closed his mouth. Although unwilling to accept his words, Mayumi wore a conflicted expression because she was unable to counter his words. Whereas Katsuto,

"Compared to an inferno, a small spark is preferable. I do agree that might be true."

After speaking in a solemn voice, Katsuto turned a fiery gaze on Koichi.

"However, there are still people who lose their lives because of small fires. If the individual, scattered sparks are not put out in time, then the small sparks are no longer small and may very well become an inferno that devours lives."

"That is a hypothetical situation."

"The pot calls the kettle black."

After crossing gazes with Koichi, Katsuto rose upon seeing that his opponent was not going to speak any further.

"Elder Saegusa."

Using the title exclusively used at the clan meetings between two equals, Katsuto called out to Koichi.

"The Juumonji Family deeply regrets the Saegusa Family's actions in regard to the media and petitions that you immediately cease and desist any anti-Magician propaganda."

"The Saegusa Family requests that the Juumonji Family deliver their protest in writing. A reply will be prepared after an official protest has been made."

Koichi also stood and slightly raised his head to look at Katsuto before replying.

"I understand. When I return home, I will get them to agree with me."

"I am sorry that you came all this way out here today. Mayumi, see Juumonji-sama out. Carefully see him to the door."

Katsuto silently bowed to Koichi, to which Koichi just as silently returned. Mayumi hurriedly moved in front of Katsuto as he was about to turn around and led him to the threshold.

When Mayumi returned from seeing Katsuto to the door, Koichi was still in the guest room. With a stern expression on her face, Mayumi stood before her father where he was relaxing on the sofa.

"Well, Mayumi. Come, sit. There's no need to be polite."

Seeing Koichi leisurely lean back on the sofa with one foot on top of the other, Mayumi sat down without saying a word.

"I more or less know what you want to say…… But you might as well say it anyway."

"Much like Otou-sama thought, I believe that Juumonji-kun's opinion makes sense."

Seeing the intense emotions warring with the steely determination in her eyes while his daughter maintained her decorous self-control, Koichi smiled and nodded.

"It is only to be expected that you would think this way. After all, Katsuto-kun and I were only speaking superficially just now."

Hearing her father's bravado, Mayumi's hands tightened their grasp.

"So there's more than meets the eye."

"You didn't understand? Katsuto-kun seems to have noticed already."

Mayumi slightly shook her head and hid her discontented, teeth-clenched face from Koichi's vision.

"As expected, Katsuto-kun has much higher tolerance than Hirofumi-kun."

Hirofumi referred to the oldest son of the Itsuwa Family, "Itsuwa Hirofumi". The Itsuwa Family wished for Mayumi to marry Hirofumi. Koichi had intended to compare Hirofumi with Katsuto, but fortunately such words never reached Mayumi's ears.

"Mayumi, Elder Kudou is already aware of this. Mister did not disapprove of my plan."

In place of the murmurs that didn't reach her ears, Koichi dropped a bomb into his daughter's ears.

"Sensei, he……?"

As Koichi had planned, Mayumi was befuddled into silence, but Mayumi was not about to go away so meekly.

"I have no idea what is on sensei's mind. What I do know is that playing with the lives of people who are of the same country and are also Magicians is wrong."

Seeing his daughter's unexpected feistiness, Koichi was not feigning but honestly surprised.

"This will only last a month at most. I have no plans to allow this to develop to such a point that it could impact daily life."

"Even if it's a merely a month, a week, it can still bring about a permanent mark on someone's heart. Maliciously wielding a pen can leave a far deeper mark than the wound left behind by a sword…… I believe the pen is mightier than the sword, and that is not just restricted to positive strength."

The normal Mayumi would have bowed out long ago. Seeing this sterner attitude that did not befit his daughter's style, a question suddenly floated across Koichi's mind.

"Mayumi, on whose behalf are you so angry for?"

"Eh……?"

Although this was a spur of the moment question, it had delivered a surprisingly telling blow against Mayumi.

"Is this for Katsuto-kun? Or is it for someone among your underclassmen at First High?"

"I didn't……."

Even Kudou Retsu's name was not enough to cower Mayumi, and yet, here she was, wavering to the point that she trembled with terror.

Chapter 11

The wave of anti-magician sentiment in the world grew stronger on a daily basis, but a school is something like a self-governing fiefdom. It doesn't have the independence of an extraterritoriality, but it is unmistakably, to a certain extent, an isolated society. Inside the grounds of First High, tranquility was also preserved. Nevertheless, Tatsuya had been certain that this was the calm before the storm since he had heard Fumiya's story.

April 19th, Thursday night. At last, the announcement of when the storm would arrive traversed the phone lines to reach Tatsuya.

[Tatsuya-san, thank you for your hospitality to us so well the other day despite the suddenness of our visit.]

"You're welcome."

Even though she called it hospitality, all they had done was set out tea and snacks. Tatsuya knew Ayako was using polite phrasing when she said that, but he wasn't one for exchanging flattery and protestations of humility.

"More importantly, what kind of news do you have for me today?"

[Tatsuya-san, wouldn't it be nice if we chatted for a while?]

"Next time."

Should she be angry or shocked - the two looks fluctuated on Ayako's face but in the end she chose to be resigned.

[Well… that's fine for today. Certainly, I have important news to impart.]

"Let me hear it."

Tatsuya's mind was concentrated on the 'important matter' even before he spoke. Being examined by a gaze strong enough to cross the screens, no, it was strong enough to cross the open space between them, made Ayako avert her eyes in shame.

[About the matter you heard about from Fumiya the other day, the schedule has been essentially set.]

Nevertheless, the embarrassed Ayako steadfastly did her duty. Concerning such things, Ayako was not the frivolous girl she appeared to be.

[On April 25th, Wednesday of next week, a member of the national diet will visit First High for an inspection.]

"The Civil Rights Party's congressman Kanda?"

[That's right. Good guesswork.]

"Isn't it rather a lack of unpredictability."

Congressman Kanda, a young politician and a member of the civil rights' branch of the opposition party which was well known to be extremely critical of the national defense force, had rapidly received increased media exposure this week. And his words and deeds were being circulated by the media, which, while superficially pro-magician at a glance, was actually for the exclusion of magicians from the military, which anyone who paid it a little serious attention understood.

[That's true.]

Perhaps because she thought Tatsuya's point was only natural, Ayako chuckled as she smiled.

[So that Congressman Kanda will invade First High with his usual entourage of reporters.]

"What will he do when he invades?"

[Who knows, I haven't thought that far.]

"So he hasn't prepared some big trick."

Tatsuya didn't even bother pretending to consider Ayako's behavior and simply nodded with an understanding look.

[I think you might be interpreting this in some kind of twisted way……]

This conversation was being held between Tatsuya and Ayako only. Miyuki wasn't near Tatsuya and Fumiya wasn't next to Ayako. Perhaps because she was so relaxed over not being watched, Ayako looked flabbergasted in a way that was appropriate for her young age.

"If something large scale was prepared for that stage, there's no way you wouldn't know, Ayako, right?"

[…..I accept your words of praise.]

"You've been praised, so enough of that."

While he summed it all up in those words, Ayako barely managed to give a cool reply (at least she thought it was); however, as could be expected of Tatsuya, he took up the chase more seriously, making her genuinely at a loss for words.

[Tatsuya-san…..are you perhaps doing this knowingly?]

"What?"

[You are such a….. no, enough.]

Apparently Ayako was making a show of being hounded but the girl swallowed the words she was going to say, faced with the poker face with no hint of emotion peeping out from it as if it was an iron wall. And also for the reason that she finally remembered that she had not made the call for that purpose.

[As you have said Tatsuya-san, I don't know what they are going to do with that too large of a stage. Maybe, it's the usual performance, right. However, the journalists who accompany him are going to be many times the norm so he probably intends to make a big fuss.]

"I see, that seems to be it."

At this point, Tatsuya appeared to have sunk into thought in front of his second cousin for the first time that evening; however, that was only for about five seconds. Tatsuya returned his gaze to Ayako and gave her a slight smile of thanks.

"Thank you for contacting me. The information is worth considering."

[I will look forward to you displaying your skills.]

Tatsuya responded to Ayako's affectation with a smile and after the polite niceties, the call was ended by her.

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The following day, April 20th, Friday. Tatsuya called Azusa and Isori to the student council room before class started.

"Eh, that's a very serious matter!"

When she heard about opposition party Congressman Kanda's inspection, Azusa stood up kicking her chair, raising her voice in distress.

"…..Is it something to get that upset about?"

Sticking to Isori like glue as usual, Kanon presented the question 'aren't you going overboard'.

"No, this is a grave situation, Kanon."

Isori rebuked his betrothed's optimism.

"If you look superficially, Congressman Kanda appears to advocate for magician's rights. However, his arbitrary reasoning is that magicians being inducted into the military is decidedly wrong; beneath the surface is his concealed intention to obstruct the relations between magicians and the military."

"Even I understand that somewhat. But Kanda's target this time is the relationship between the military and education, right? Not us."

Perhaps, Kanon disliked Isori siding with Azusa and Tatsuya and not herself. She directed a slightly displeased look at Isori as she answered.

"Even if it damages our freedom?"

Kanon's face made an 'eh?' at Isori's retort. Kanon still had not hit upon what Isori was worrying about.

"If the people who believe that the practical application of magicians by the military should be stopped take power, they will certainly prohibit both magic high school students like us from choosing to enroll in the defense college upon graduation and graduates of the magic university from joining the military as well."

"You mean they'd employ thought control."

Kanon asked with a look of disbelief to which Isori turned his head away from so he could close his eyes. This was not a rejection of her spoken question, he was rejecting the look on her face when she asked the question.

"Fundamentally the principle of pacifism doesn't even accept the analysis that defensive armaments are needed to deal with military threats to one's own nation. They'll suppress freedom of speech by forbidding slightly positive assertions about the existence of the army. For that purpose not even violent measures would be forbidden. To them, there is probably no reason to hesitate using thought control on us. While they preach about the human rights of magicians, they take away a magician's right to choose their own employment without concern."

It was an unexpectedly wicked diatribe. Since Kanon who should know Isori better than anyone else seemed somewhat daunted, it might be natural for Tatsuya to feel surprised. Perhaps, Isori had some kind of bad memories about the 'fundamental principles of pacifism'.

"…..For that reason, we can't pretend that it is someone else's concern, Kanon. So, Shiba-kun, how do you intend to resist them?"

Perhaps even himself feeling that he had gone a little overboard, Isori changed the topic with an awkwardly amiable smile.

"You called us here because you had some kind of idea, right?"

"Yes."

Tatsuya gave a brief answer to Isori, and turned around to exchange a look with Miyuki. From the time Azusa and the rest had come, Miyuki had been hanging back behind Tatsuya's back, but now she passed the electronic blackboard she had been carrying in her hand over to Azusa and Isori. Tatsuya saw their gazes drop onto the electronic blackboard and immediately began his explanation.

"They are condemning Magic High Schools as sites of military education and claiming that the schools are directing students into military related fields. So then, wouldn't it be great to show that the fruits of magic education are more than things related to military purposes?"

Tatsuya spoke in a frank tone anticipating the conclusion. No one responded to his words with sounds of comprehension, objections or questions.

"So I thought we would want to hold a slightly showy demonstration that coincides with Congressman Kanda's visit to the school."

"…Slightly?"

"…This?"

Azusa and Isori finally made these responses. Their shocked faces were an indirect form of protest. However, their voices did not express their shock as well as the looks on their faces so it gave off a superficial impression.

"It will need large-scale preparations, but the demo itself wouldn't be all that different from normal electrical discharge experiments, implosion experiments and the like. The outward appearance is superior, though."

"Maybe we could only make a show of it."

Although Azusa protested in a weak voice, Tatsuya's wry smile with which he was enduring this did not change.

"If we made something only similar in appearance the meaning would be quite different… and so this would be eminently effective. But, Shiba-kun…"

Perhaps he finally got over the shock, Isori after vocally persuading himself to agree gave Tatsuya a somber look.

"Can you really do it? One of the Three Great Puzzles of Weight Systemic Magic, The Gravity Control-Type Magic thermonuclear fusion reactor."

Isori's questioning of the most essential part of the plan made Tatsuya make a slightly hesitant face.

"I can't make the actual thing yet."

However, this did not indicate a lack of confidence regarding the practicality, he was pondering how he should answer the question.

"I did not say an experimental reactor. Not in the form of an reactor. But, we can produce something with the potential to implement nuclear fusion in a showier and more easily understood way than the thesis we did for last year's competition."

"…..A 'stellar furnace'?"

Azusa, who had never taken her eyes off the electronic blackboard throughout the conversation, murmured that, still in the same posture.

"The Gravity Control-Type Magic thermonuclear fusion reactor. I think this concept is the opposite of Suzune-san's proposal of an intermittent style of nuclear fusion."

Azusa was staring at the electronic blackboard as if boring into it; she didn't look at either Tatsuya's face or Isori's face.

"The quantity of energy that it is capable of producing per unit of time is incomparably larger than Suzune's system….. If Shiba-kun's stellar furnace is implemented, there will be no distinction between day and night, it would be possible to supply energy that is unaffected by the influence of weather conditions. Factories also could operate without worrying about the electrical supply and it would put an end to fear of another radical temperature drop. There is probably no other demonstration superior to this for showing magic's use for peaceful purposes."

Azusa broke off her monologue-like whispering and turned to face Tatsuya.

"Is this an original plan of yours, Shiba-kun?"

"It's not a unique idea in by any means, but certainly, this is something I am working to create. The method is still far from practical since the magic skill level needed is so high, but if our school's students have the ability and if it's for a short period of time, then there is potential to operate an experimental reactor."

As Tatsuya answered Azusa's question, he nodded firmly and deliberately. It was like he was saying the Gravity Control-Type Magic thermonuclear fusion reactor was the summit of his ambitions. The stellar furnace was nothing more than the main component for realizing his own original goal, but at this point of time, Tatsuya did not intend to make that obvious.

"Is that so…… understood."

Azusa also returned his nod with uncharacteristic boldness. Tatsuya hadn't told them everything; however, his feelings about making the stellar furnace a reality were genuine. And, Azusa sensed Tatsuya's sincerity and nodded.

"Isori-kun."

Azusa turned to face Isori.

"I wish to cooperate with Shiba-kun's plan. How about you, Isori-kun?"

"I will also cooperate. A public stellar furnace experiment. Not just a countermeasure to Congressman Kanda; as someone aiming to be a magic engineer, I am all for doing it."

As he answered Azusa, Isori also nodded his head up and down.

On the noon break of that day, Tatsuya went to the staff room to visit Professor Jennifer Smith. To hold experiments not in the course curriculum, a written application must be submitted; if it is part of club activities then to the club adviser, if it is an independent experiment not part of club activities then to the class teacher, if there is no class teacher due to being in the second course then to the staff room; no experiments are allowed without the school's permission.

When Jennifer looked at the list of magics to be used at the beginning of the written application, she suddenly raised her eyebrows.

"Gravity control, Coulomb force control, Four Phase Shift, Gamma ray filter, and a Neutron Barrier? Shiba-kun, do you intend to do a high output laser cannon experiment?"

"I do not intend to do something like that."

Tatsuya artlessly replied to his professor's question in a traditional style. There was no need to give his answer a strange aspect, but perhaps his choice of a cliché phrase that he didn't have to think about was due to the sheer unexpectedness of the question. While he compiled the list of magic combinations he had offered, he had not been aware of the potential for their use to complete a laser device that uses a nuclear fusion reactor until Jennifer had pointed it out to him.

However, Jennifer was not even listening to Tatsuya's answer, so they might be even. Her question had been a kind of a monologue; Jennifer's eyes were glued to the written application.

"The subject of the experiment is extremely ambitious……"

Jennifer looked up from the electronic paper displaying the written application and turned her eyes to Tatsuya who was standing to the side.

"Can you guarantee the safety?"

"According to my calculations, I can guarantee it."

Tatsuya's answer could be thought of as irresponsible, but Jennifer did not chide him about it. It was the role of an experiment to determine whether a theoretical possibility was an actual possibility. "Stopping an experiment because it was unknown whether it was actually safe" was in a sense putting the cart before the horse. She was a scientist who wouldn't have anything to do with that kind of foolishness.

"In this school's presentation at last year's Thesis Competition, a proton to proton chain reaction was used to avoid exposure to neutron radiation. Why does this experiment use a heavy hydrogen reaction?"

Of course, that did not mean she did not consider the risks. That risks should be minimized by calculations was something Jennifer naturally kept in mind.

It goes without saying that Tatsuya also considered that point. There was no hesitation in his answer.

"The conditions for using the original proton to proton chain reaction were too strict for the energy source. The techniques in Ichihara-senpai's experiment were likely to guarantee the successful control of the reaction, but if the utility of the energy reactor is taken into account, I believe the returns are too little to justify the investment of the techniques. Besides, with the proton to proton chain reaction, the danger of exposure to radiation is only slight if the neutrons don't break out."

Jennifer silently considered Tatsuya's answer for a while with her arms crossed.

"……Understood. I cannot give permission at my own discretion. The written application will circulate. A decision should be made by the end of the schoolday."

"Thank you. Furthermore, please keep the experiment secret from outsiders."

Tatsuya had not thought that he would receive immediate approval to use the radiation experiment room and the campus. After a few additional last words, Tatsuya bowed a goodbye to Jennifer.

"So, did you get permission for the experiment?"

After school in the Student council room. Tatsuya, who was posed this question by Azusa, offered the written application with the principal's electronic signature stored on it that had been sent to him.

"A condition has been attached, but it was approved."

"Condition?"

Hearing Isori's question to Tatsuya, Azusa looked up from the electronic paper displaying the written application.

"It's only natural, a teacher will supervise. That is the condition."

"I see. So, which teacher will work with us?"

Just as Isori was asking for a more detailed answer from Tatsuya, the chime rang signaling a visitor.

"Tsuzura-sensei. He has thoughtfully come here for the meeting."

Miyuki, who checked the monitor, turned around to answer Isori.

Izumi promptly stood up. She didn't seem the least bit energetic; however, as the only first year among upperclassmen, it was proper for her to go to the door to greet Professor Tsuzura.

Student council activities temporarily ceased with the coming of Tsuzura. Izumi, who was in the middle of training in student council procedures, also stopped her hands and went to the table for the meeting. Tsuzura sat down in the seat the student council president usually sat in, and the student council room quickly changed into the experiment meeting room. Of course, Tatsuya, who had planned this experiment, had also planned on helpers beyond the student council members here. He had asked them to meet him here without telling them the reason.

"I've gone over the protocol for the experiment. I think it's an interesting approach."

After moistening his throat with the tea Pixie served, Tsuzura was the first to speak up at the meeting.

"So, Shiba-kun. Have you considered who to assign to which duty?"

What he meant by duty assignments was who would perform which magic. The magic that was to be used in this: Gravity Control, Coulomb Force Control, Four Phase Movement, Gamma Ray Filter, Neutron Barrier.

"First, I want Mitsui-san to take charge of the Gamma Ray Filter."

"Me!?"

Abruptly designated, Honoka spoke out hysterically. She hadn't even heard the particulars of the experiment until this stage, so it was understandable.

"In magic involving controlling the frequency of electromagnetic waves, I know of no one who is superior to you, Honoka. Won't you undertake it?"

"I understand! I will do my best!"

Nevertheless, in the end, Honoka, after hearing no more than Tatsuya's "please", nodded her head in agreement. Considering her feelings, this was probably fairly inevitable.

"Isori-senpai, please take Coulomb Force Control."

Perhaps they had already discussed this, as Isori just silently nodded.

"For Neutron Barrier, there is a first year I know of, I think she can take care of this."

At this statement of Tatsuya's, Izumi's face twitched.

"A first year? Is that okay?"

The unease was probably insuppressible even for Tsuzura. It felt like he interrupted without thinking.

"Yes. The girl possesses genius level talent for barrier magic against objects."

"Who is it?"

"Her name is Sakurai Minami. My cousin."

"I see."

However, hearing Tatsuya's explanation, Tsuzura relaxed to his former posture with a relieved look. Tatsuya thought Tsuzura changed his attitude

a little too easily. Maybe, it wasn't because she was his cousin that Tsuzura's worries eased; Tsuzura was probably confident because she was Miyuki's cousin, Tatsuya extrapolated.

"I haven't determined who to ask to handle the Four Phase Movement, yet. And, I believe my sister will handle the necessary Gravity Control."

At the same time as Tatsuya said that, Miyuki made a small seated bow.

"I believe that is a suitable personnel selection."

This time, Tsuzura's face showed understanding. Currently, in First High school, the student with the highest level of magic power aside from the third years was Miyuki. Tsuzura naturally knew this.

"With all that done then, the only thing undecided in the first order of business is who to ask to handle the Four Phase Movement."

As he spoke, Tsuzura turned his eyes to Azusa.

"Is there any impediment for Nakajou-san?"

The one who replied to Tsuzura's suggestion was Tatsuya, not Azusa herself.

"I believe the president should oversee the overall operation."

"I see. Certainly, that would be appropriate."

Withdrawing his own suggestion, Tsuzura once again looked lost in thought. At that point, Izumi raised her hand.

"Umm, is it all right if that task were left to us?"

This proposal should have been something unanticipated, but, without letting what was going on in the back of his mind show, Tatsuya asked in a businesslike tone.

"By us, do you mean the two of you, Kasumi and yourself?"

"Yes, I might not have enough power myself to do it, but if Kasumi-chan and I do it together, I think we would surely be useful."

Listening to Izumi's words were the other six people (Tsuzura, Azusa, Isori, Tatsuya, Miyuki, Honoka) here, among whom four had a puzzled look on their faces.

"…..I can understand Tsuzura-sensei knowing, but I didn't think even Shiba-senpai would know."

Naturally, Izumi herself felt having doubts was more natural, so she had not expected to be easily accepted. There was no way an upperclassman who had been chosen as an engineer for the Nine Schools Competition and as a representative to the Thesis Competition would not know what it meant for two people to be in charge of one sequence. Furthermore, he had not shown any surprise. There could be no other reason than that he knew of the scope of their power.

"Let's go into that topic at another opportunity. Such an opportunity might never come though."

Tatsuya easily sloughed off Izumi's searching stare to look at the model of the experiment reflected on the screen in the surface of the wall.

"Tsuzura-sensei, Mitsui-san, and Saegusa-san do not know the particulars of the experiment. So I thought going through the explanation would also confirm the details."

With Tsuzura's agreement, Tatsuya went over the details of the experiment with the student council members. Azusa, Isori, and Miyuki already knew the contents but no one looked bored.

"…..The stellar furnace system from a technical point of view is still underdeveloped. However, if we cooperate and function as a team, then without a doubt we can succeed in this experiment concerning what is one of the so-called three great problems."

At last he summed it all up and Tatsuya's 'stellar furnace' was turned into a small stunt.

◊ ◊ ◊

The stellar furnace experiment's actual preparation period was from April 21st to April 24th, a four day period. If the time spent crafting the experimental devices for the Thesis Competition is considered then it was a hopelessly insufficient period. However, this time there was not going to be a full school mobilization. In the first place, Tatsuya and the others were not supposed to know of Congressman Kanda's forthcoming inspection. This experiment must appear unrelated to the visit of Congressman Kanda

and the media. It wasn't necessary to conceal the Stellar Furnace experiment itself, but it was temporarily confined to volunteer accomplices and the student council officers.

However, from the start Tatsuya and Miyuki hadn't been pessimistic about the situation. As he had said to Isori, this time they were not going to build the structure of an energy reactor. They were only going to display the structure. This experiment was fundamentally a performance: they were not constructing actually functioning experimental devices like they did for the thesis competition. Tatsuya was very conscious of the difference. On the other hand, Miyuki could not look on anything Tatsuya attempted pessimistically.

The preparations steadily advanced to the goal and begun to look like the real thing, and the faces of the other participants in the experiment began to look less impatient. From the face of Kasumi, who seriously worked on the experiment determined not to do less with her efforts than that darn Miyuki with a frowning expression that all but said she was unwilling as well; from the face of Hirakawa Chiaki, whose attitude displayed the question, 'how did this happen?', but never let her hands rest for a second either; and from the face of Tomitsuka, who had innocently dragged in Chiaki with good intentions and whose face went back and forth from letting his unease disappear to looking resistant. —Among them was a silver haired first year who had intended to only gaze at his hero, Tatsuya, but whose whole body spoke of his delight at helping; Sumisu Kento had managed to slip in despite being an outsider.

And April 24th, Tuesday. After school the day before the main event, in the radiation experiment room, the final rehearsal was being held. A 50% heavy water and 50% light water mixture had been poured into the globe shaped water tank made from a highly transparent, pressure resistant resin. The large quantity of heavy water had been provided by Tsuzura. It was possible to industrially manufacture heavy water from ordinary sea water, but securing a large quantity of heavy water was of course difficult for a simple high school student. The abundance of heavy water that they were able to get was the result of Tsuzura exercising his connections to the fullest.

"Okay, let's start. Miyuki."

"Yes."

First, Gravity Control magic was invoked.

"Kasumi, Izumi."

"Four Phase Shift, go."

The twin sisters spoke as one and executed the Four Phase Shift magic.

"Honoka, Minami."

"Gamma Ray Filter in effect."

"Neutron Barrier, in place."

He did not rely on the girls' reports; Tatsuya used his own 'eye' to confirm that the steps of the experiment had been cleared.

"Miyuki."

"Focus point established."

Tatsuya called out Miyuki's name once again, informing Miyuki that all the preparations were made.

"Isori-senpai."

"Electromagnetic repulsion force neutralization, start."

And when the last safety valve was released, the voices of the members in position in front of the gauge fluttered about doing the checklist.

"Degree of Gravitational field Stability, no issues." "Gamma rays, measurement within safety limits." "Neutron rays, measurement within safety limits." "....."

Tatsuya serenely gazed at the first step of his dream while listening to those voices.

The last rehearsal ended well. If this was a simple experiment then they would have been satisfied with the conclusive results they received today. However, this experiment was being held as a demonstration against anti-magician advocates. Tomorrow was the crucial moment. The participants were keeping their expectations quiet as they departed from the experiment room.

Due to Azusa and Isori taking on the cleaning up and closing up, the other participants moved to the student council room. It was nearly time for the gate to close, but maybe they felt they had entered some kind of state of continuous emergency. Tatsuya pondered that. Still, the other participants, Miyuki and Honoka who followed Tatsuya, Izumi, and Minami who followed Miyuki, and Kasumi who followed Izumi, formed a kind of chain. Kasumi and Minami were not members of the student council; however, no one here right now was bothered by that.

"Welcome back."

Shizuku greeted Tatsuya and the rest. She wasn't a member of the student council either, but, like the boss (?) of the public morals committee, she frequently used the stairway that connected the student council room and the public morals committee room. From her taciturn exterior, it was hard to imagine that Shizuku actually had a pretty laid back personality. Even so, her sense of responsibility was above average, so, since she was asked to look after things in their absence, she diligently did the duty like this.

"Sorry for making you wait, Shizuku. You really helped us out."

"Nothing special happened."

Miyuki's words of thanks were met by a 'don't worry about it' headshake, and after informing them that nothing unusual happened, Shizuku turned to face her best friend.

"Honoka, about that?"

Instantly, Honoka's face displayed an 'urk…..' flinch. Perhaps discerning the answer to her question from merely that, Shizuku just showed an 'oh, well' look.

Rising up and moving behind Honoka's back, Shizuku grabbed both of her friend's shoulders. Honoka was taller by half a head; however, paying that no mind, Shizuku forcibly changed the direction Honoka's body was facing, so Honoka was directly opposite Tatsuya facing him head on. Taking her hands off, leaving Honoka there, she looked here and there in the vicinity until she found Honoka's bag and reached in to get a small box wrapped in pretty paper. Pressing that box into Honoka's hands, she went behind her friend's back again to give her a strong shove in the back.

Honoka stopped herself after one step and looked up at Tatsuya's face that was closer than before. There was still too much space between their positions to enact a love scene. Of course, with this many onlookers, no matter how easy it was for Honoka to constrict her vision, it would be difficult for her to act boldly. The attempt she was going to make was going to be a very innocent occurrence.

"Umm, Tatsuya-san!"

After that statement, Honoka squeezed her eyes shut and offered the box with both hands.

"Today is your birthday, Tatsuya-san!"

Leaving no room for Tatsuya to answer, Honoka continued speaking. She was talking so fast it was doubtful that she was taking the time to breath, but it definitely wasn't hard to understand what she was saying.

"It's not much, but I worked hard at picking it out! Please accept it!"

Kasumi's voice saying something like 'Do Mitsui-senpai and Shiba-senpai have that kind of relationship' reached Tatsuya's ears from a corner of the room, but Honoka undoubtedly didn't hear her.

"Of course, I will accept it."

The moment Tatsuya's hand touched Honoka's present, he felt not a piercing but a penetrating gaze. However, when he took fleeting sidelong glances behind him, all traces of that sword-like stare had disappeared.

"Thank you."

"N-No, it's nothing. Umm, please unwrap it when you're alone."

"Hm? Ah, got it."

Tatsuya nodded with a slightly mystified look and Honoka let out a big sigh. She seemed like she was just about ready to collapse having used up so much of her strength, but fortunately all she did was stumble. Shizuku decided by the 'I adore Tatsuya' look on Honoka's face that she was not up to anything else and took charge from next to Honoka.

"Tatsuya-san, are you free next Sunday?"

As usual, Shizuku suddenly started speaking. Tatsuya was quite used to it, but he couldn't keep from being instantly confused.

"What time?"

Of course, he was only confused for a moment. And he continued the conversation without missing a beat.

"The evening. Around six o'clock."

"……That's fine."

He had a meeting on developing a completely thought controlled model of CAD on Sunday with FLT's R&D section three, but six pm in the evening left him plenty of time to return. Neither the main office or R&D section three were in the habit of letting their meetings run over.

"It would be a little late, but I want to hold a birthday party for Tatsuya at my house. Is that okay?"

This 'Is that okay?' was packed with three different meanings: 'Is it okay to count on your participation?', 'Is it okay to have it at my house?' and 'Is it all right that I just went and planned a birthday party for you?'.

"It's completely fine. Thank you for inviting me."

There were no ulterior motives beneath Shizuku's proposal to give Tatsuya a birthday party out of her own good will, he knew that without even checking. Tatsuya nodded without even pretending to think about it and Shizuku answered with a slight nod. While she looked expressionless, there was a slight hint of smugness in the shape of her mouth.

"Miyuki and Minami-chan too."

Without a moment's delay she spoke to Miyuki and Minami, needlessly hiding her embarrassment.

"Yes, it's fine."

"Thank you for your invitation."

Unrelated to Miyuki's smiling answer and Minami's more diffident answer, Kasumi was looking at Tatsuya with an appraising eye. Kasumi hadn't thought Tatsuya was the type to be popular with girls, but that mental evaluation was shaken.

Chapter 12

On the way back from school, as the three of them parted from their friends and boarded the Cabinet, Miyuki seemed strangely agitated.

There was nothing noticeable on the surface. Even close friends would probably only wonder 'is she considering something?'. But in Tatsuya's eyes, his sister was fretting considerably. Getting off at the station closest to home, her condition only worsened as they approached the ticket gate.

"Mi-"

"Uhm, Onii-sama."

At the same time Tatsuya tried to call her name, Miyuki timidly raised her head.

"Ah, what is it?"

Miyuki didn't reply immediately at Tatsuya's inquiry, but instead moved aside so as not to block the other passengers and stood still.

"That.....well, could, you please accompany me shopping for a little while?"

"I don't mind at all, but....."

Just what in the world is the matter, Tatsuya swallowed without saying. Miyuki wasn't the type who enjoyed going out shopping as entertainment on weekdays. If there was something they really needed to buy she'd order it online and it'd arrive the very same day. Besides, she wasn't asking straightforwardly.

"Minami-chan, sorry but could you go back and prepare dinner yourself?"

"Certainly, Miyuki-neesama. Tatsuya-niisama, I will be going on ahead."

Without showing any concern towards Miyuki, Minami briskly headed towards the commuter hall. This also invited suspicion. Although not as astute as Tatsuya, Minami should have also perceived Miyuki's state. If the reason was because Minami was confident in Tatsuya's abilities as an escort, this would be somewhat understandable. But Tatsuya could not help but feel something was off.

Separated from Minami, Tatsuya led Miyuki towards the nearest cafe. He thought it'd be best to hear her out first.

Entering the store, Miyuki seemed relieved. This further increased Tatsuya's suspicions. Miyuki had said she wished to shop, but now that they were in the cafe she was for some reason making what seemed like a 'mission accomplished' expression.

When the waitress came for their order, Tatsuya had a hot coffee, and Miyuki, under some stress, ordered not a cup, but a pot of tea. It appeared they wouldn't be leaving the cafe anytime soon. Could it be that Miyuki had simply wanted time alone to talk, Tatsuya wondered.

"Miyuki."

Increasingly worried, Tatsuya spoke up to Miyuki before their drinks had arrived.

"Yes, Onii-sama."

Miyuki, as she replied, was her usual self. She smiled happily as she spoke his name. Her distress earlier seemed like a dream. However, just because of that he couldn't leave matters unsettled.

"Is there something up?"

Tatsuya decided to try the straightforward route.

"Eh, oh no. It's fine now."

It seemed Miyuki herself was also aware of her previous state. She shook her head quickly, but Tatsuya perceived there was yet something unmentioned in her heart.

They broke off the conversation when the waitress came with their drinks. Miyuki checked the tea leaves by opening the pot lid, then after closing the lid and waiting a while poured into a small cup. Her careful movements, more polite than necessary, could only be described as gradual.

Miyuki took a small sip of the tea, then wordlessly added half a spoonful of sugar. Twice, three times, four.....upon the 20th Tatsuya could keep quiet no longer, and spoke to Miyuki in a coy tone.

"As unlikely as it is, could it be that you took Honoka's present....."

The spoon clanged as it bounced off the cup.

"Not at all! I would never!"

"Sorry, of course not. I never considered it for an instant. Forgive me."

As Miyuki desperately denied it with a flushed expression, Tatsuya awkwardly apologized.

"Oh no.....I'm not unhappy or mad at all, it's just I've been preoccupied, and.....it's just a complete misunderstanding. So um, Onii-sama, there's no need to bow your head."

Now upset, Miyuki appealed to Tatsuya to raise his head. Pushed by her vigor Tatsuya looked up, but the question lingered in his mind. As he said, he had not seriously thought that Miyuki's consternation was due to jealousy. The reason for her suspicious behavior remained unaccounted for. He decided, however, that pursuing it any further would be awkward and gave up.

Seeing Tatsuya's unsure expression, Miyuki tilted her head anxiously. As their confused eyes met, they both began to laugh.

After that, they did a bit of window shopping for an hour before heading back. Tatsuya also put Miyuki's 'worries' out of his mind. It wasn't that he didn't remember them anymore, but rather he simply didn't bring it up since she seemed alright again.

Just what had she been suffering. The moment he finished changing and stepped into the dining room, having been called via the communication unit, he found out.

The sound of crackers welcomed him in. A shower of colorful streamers blocked his sight, before falling at his feet.

"Onii-sama, happy birthday!"

Having taken off her uniform jacket leaving only the necktie, Miyuki stood in her one-piece. The dress was sleeveless and pure white, complimenting Miyuki's slender figure. It was the familiar uniform she wore everyday, yet the impression after removing the jacket was significant. It was like it had been designed for her alone.

Behind Miyuki was Minami in her usual highneck one-piece and apron. Upon the table were the vivid masterful results of her cooking.

"So, you were stalling me for the preparations....."

Tatsuya raised an eye as he looked towards Miyuki. She shrugged nonchalantly as she glanced away.

"Well.....I'm really happy. Thank you."

In short, they had wanted to surprise him. Certainly, this would not have been possible when it had been just the two of them before. It may have seemed slightly childish, but Tatsuya was deeply aware that it had all been for him.

"Onii-sama, please take a seat. We're waiting on the cake right now."

As Tatsuya smiled, Miyuki's face shone as she fired up and busied herself. With a slight look of resignation, Minami approached carrying a cake, inserted candles, placed a knife and fork in front of Tatsuya, and lit the candles before turning the lights off and sitting down.

"Onii-sama, please."

As he watched Miyuki bustling around, without saying a word, Tatsuya as requested blew out the 17 candles in one breath.

Unexpectedly treated even to Miyuki and Minami's singing voices, the birthday party ended vibrantly despite only three people being present. He had been dragged along from beginning to end by his sister's exuberance and even made some noise of his own such as clapping, but now he was relaxing in his room by himself.

Preparing for the experiments tomorrow, it was a good change of pace. His sister had likely thought of that too, Tatsuya thought. He then suddenly remembered that he hadn't even untied the ribbon from the gift he'd received from Honoka.

He took a long, thin box from his bag. Despite the size, it was rather heavy. Expecting it to be some technological product, he removed the ribbon and carefully peeled off the wrapping paper. What was revealed was a luxurious wooden box. Opening the lid, he saw a spring loaded antique pocket watch.

"Wasn't this expensive.....?"

Muttering subconsciously, when he checked the manufacturer engraved inside he smiled subtly. Carved within was the mark of the corporation run by Shizuku's father. In other words, this had come from Shizuku.

The back of the lid where a photograph went was empty. Shizuku would most likely have placed a photo of Honoka there, but Honoka herself seemed to have been less than enthusiastic.

Imagining the scene playing out in his head, Tatsuya let out a chuckle.

Through the sound of his laughter, he heard a knock on the door.

"It's Miyuki. Onii-sama, may I come in?"

Her voice barely reached inside the room, it was so quiet. Whatever her intent, it seemed she didn't want to disturb their housemate. Tatsuya likewise opened the door silently with this in mind.

His sister stood there resplendent, regally dressed with a touch of makeup. Her one-piece dress was a robe decollete of pale cherry, with plenty of lace and boldly exposing the chest and back. Her flowing black hair had been tied back, revealing her blemishless skin, and its complex combed out form shone against her pearly back. The skirt, which reached her ankles, comprised strips of cloth of different length, and the shape of her flawless legs peeked out from the thigh down. Her charm now was even greater than in the morning when she had awoken him, and he was lost in her beauty for an instant.

"Um, Onii-sama?"



"Ah, sorry. Come in."

Tatsuya had been entranced by her momentarily. Dazed and blocking the entrance, at Miyuki's puzzled voice he came to and moved aside, letting her in.

Miyuki had not come empty handed. Her right hand held a bottle, a handbag dangled from her left elbow, and in her left hand were two glasses.

Seeing both her hands full, Tatsuya softly closed the door. Miyuki lightly bent her knees in thanks, then placed the bottle down side by side with the glasses on Tatsuya's desk.

"Is this Honoka's present?"

Miyuki spotted the pocket watch still on his desk.

"Yeah."

"It's a very elegant design isn't it?"

"It is."

Miyuki herself probably held no ill intent, but Tatsuya felt bad somehow, and stowed Honoka's present away in a drawer.

"So, what's all this?"

Retrieving a spare chair from the wall storage for Miyuki, then sitting down in front of the desk himself, Tatsuya glanced over the bottle and glasses. Miyuki moved her seat, a wheeled stool without a backrest, next to Tatsuya and sat a distance away, smiling shyly.

"Onii-sama, do you remember April 24th last year.....?"

"Of course."

Her question had absolutely nothing to do with his question, but it seemed that if he didn't answer this he wouldn't get an answer himself, so he thought back.

"You suddenly appeared in a kimono."

He had been stunned then as he was now by this dress — not that he said that aloud.

"Right, that happened too."

Miyuki murmured as she shifted herself out of sight slightly. She had been earnest back then, but looking back, it seemed even she was embarrassed.

"Uhm besides that.....last year, Onii-sama, it was just the two of us."

"Yeah."

Just what Miyuki wanted to say, Tatsuya already knew by this stage. As he smiled with love, Miyuki also returned a clear smile.

"The year before, was celebrated with just us two as well."

"I remember."

"Minami-chan is with us this year, so we celebrated together but....."

Pausing, Miyuki looked down in embarrassment.

"In the end, I really.....want some time alone too. For a little while, could we celebrate Onii-sama's birthday with just me.....?"

Leaning forward in his chair, Tatsuya reached for Miyuki's face.

His hands brushed her cheek.

Miyuki's shoulders were trembling.

Gently held in Tatsuya's hands, Miyuki's head was brought up.

Their eyes met.

Miyuki's eyes were moist, and her face red.

Suddenly, she turned away.

To avoid her brother discovering the heat now emanating from her cheeks.

"Onii-sama, a toast?"

"Champagne?"

Tatsuya quietly lowered his hands, but his eyes remained firmly fixed on Miyuki.

"Yes, but it's alright. There's barely any alcohol in it."

"Ah, I'll open it."

Perhaps the cork was in tight; Tatsuya took the bottle from Miyuki's trembling fingers. Deftly removing the cork without sending it flying, he returned the bottle to his sister.

"Thank you.....please go ahead."

She placed a half-filled glass in front of Tatsuya. Pouring into her own glass, Miyuki held it up with her right hand.

Tatsuya took hold of his glass with his left hand, and held it near Miyuki's.

A clear sound rang out.

"Onii-sama.....happy birthday. I'm thankful that Onii-sama is with me."

"Thanks. I'm thankful that I could be your brother."

The two of them tilted their glasses at the same time.

On a side note, the present Miyuki had prepared was in the handbag. Within the box was a somewhat oversized locket pendant, exquisitely engraved with motifs of the sun, moon, and stars. A 3D photo of Miyuki in the dress she wore now had been placed inside. Earlier Miyuki had been regretting about 'letting Honoka take the initiative', but in these terms it seemed Miyuki was still in the lead.

—And Tatsuya, unable to fathom his sister's intentions, worried continually for over an hour.

Chapter 13

Tuesday, April 24th. Today, Shippou Takuma spoke privately with the ally who shared his goal of "a new order", Sawamura Maki, at the usual time before heading home.

The time was already 2300 hours. In order to avoid troubling people at home (including the servants), he had dined outside and called ahead to inform his family that they didn't need to wait for him. The servants living at his house should have already turned in for the night, so Takuma slipped in through the backdoor without ringing the doorbell.

"Takuma-san."

As he was removing his shoes, a young man a few years his senior called out to Takuma.

"Sensei is waiting for you in the study."

Sensei referred to the head of the Shippou Family, Shippou Takumi. The young man serving as his father's assistant must have received orders from his father to wait here for Takuma. Despite thinking "how irritating", Takuma couldn't ignore this. After replying "Got it" to the young man, Takuma headed for the study.

On the surface, the Shippou Family worked as investment advisors, especially in the field of weather derivative instruments. As a particular type of risk management tool, weather derivative instruments were broadly used to predict atypical weather hazards. As a financial tool, the value of weather derivative instruments was determined by various weather values such as temperature, humidity, condensation, etc. While industrialization of the food industry has decreased the efficacy of weather derivative instruments, the rise of solar energy as the principal provider of electricity in more developed countries has rendered the estimated time for sunshine a major indicator for earnings projections used by corporations. The reason why Shippou Takumi was referred to as "sensei" was because he was publicly acknowledged within the nation to be the authority on annual weather predictions.

However, right now Takuma was facing the head of one of the 18 Replacement Clans, a Magician whose magical prowess rivaled that of the Ten Master Clans, Shippou Takumi.

"Come in."

This phrase was spoken to Takuma as he entered the study, shortly before he sat on the set of sofas that were separated from the thick, heavy desk that his father used.

Takumi rose from his office table and sat down while facing Takuma.

"Takuma, how's high school? Are you enjoying it?"

Did you call me here at this hour to talk about this nonsense, that was what Takuma thought on reflex. Though he knew very well that this was just small talk, Takuma's infuriated emotions were about to eclipse his rationality.

"Father, I should have already said this a countless times before. For me, high school isn't a place for fun and games."

In response to his son's words, Takumi wore a "Seriously?" expression.

"How stubborn you are. There's no need to overexert yourself to this degree."

"Father, you're the one who is too relaxed!"

Seeing Takumi's placid attitude, Takuma's agitation finally exploded.

"We obviously only have one more year until the next Ten Master Clans Selection Hearing. At this rate, those Saegusa wallflowers will once again seize our place in the Ten Master Clans while the Shippou will again suffer the indignity of being inferior to them!"

"The Selection Hearing is something that selects 10 families out of 28 families."

The voice Takumi spoke towards Takuma was interlaced with a sense of futility.

"Fixating only on the Saegusa Family is absolutely pointless. Even you, Takuma, should be aware of that level."

This was not the first time Takumi said these words. Rather, save for the days that he never interacted with his son, Takumi had the feeling that he said this to his son on a daily basis in the past year.

"There is a point."

Furthermore, there was never an instance where Takuma came around to his father's words.

"The Saegusa Family is nothing more than one family among the 28."

"Those guys are different."

Today, Takuma's attitude was as stubborn as ever.

"Takuma."

"They're not the same. The Saegusa are different."

Takumi heaved a sigh filled with exhaustion.

"Who was it who implanted such a deeply rooted obsession in you?"

"It doesn't matter who it is! It is true that the Saegusa betrayed the name "3" and used the stolen "7" to win their place among the Ten Master Clans!"

"Takuma…… The days where they were the "Saegusa (3)"[2] instead of the "Saegusa (7)" preceded the establishment of the Ten Master Clans. When Sensei proposed the Ten Master Clans system, the Saegusa had already become the "Saegusa (7)". Furthermore, they do indeed possess the strength that towers above others in the 28 families."

"In terms of the strength that towers above others, that's only the result of them secretly devouring the research results from the 3rd and 7th Research Labs. Plainly the final experimental body came from the 3rd Research Lab and broke away from the 3rd Research Lab before stealing the "Herd Defense" that was originally conceptualized and developed by the Shippou Family just as we were on the last phase prior to completion entirely for their own benefit. Not only our Shippou Family, but the Mitsuya, Mikazuki, Tanabata, and Nanase Families were all duped by the Saegusa Family! Father, how are you so calm even when this is clearly how the situation was!?"

"Takuma. Like us, the Magicians from the Saegusa Family are also experimental bodies."

Hearing the sentences uttered by Takumi in such a bitter tone, even the excitable Takuma fell silent.

"They are beings who have been constructed. The only difference is that, unlike the other 27 families…… no, the other 26 families content with their lot as experiments, they have chosen their own path. This is not something to rue, but is instead praiseworthy."

"…..So in essence, Father, you are saying that treachery and stealing a march are praiseworthy things?"

Takuma managed to muster a response.

"Aren't you trying to steal a march on the Ten Master Clans right now?"

"That's……!"

However, Takuma's retort was like a boomerang that missed its target and came back to its thrower.

Before his son, who had fallen silent with a sullen expression on his face, Takumi sighed slightly.

"Forget it. I know you weren't going to accept this regardless of what I say."

Takuma's "accusation" and Takumi's "persuasion" had not started today. Including this instance, father and son had retread the same conversation several dozen times. In spite of this, they still couldn't help but argue with one another, which only proved that their bond as father and son could not be sundered.

"I called you here today because I had something else to say."

"……At such a late hour?"

Takuma threw in as much sarcasm as he could in his response.

"That's because it was absolutely necessary to tell you this today. Seriously, if I knew you would return so late, I would have arranged a meeting with you beforehand. This way, I could have spoken with you when you returned home from school."

Nevertheless, this was a self-destructive gesture on Takuma's part.

"……Sorry."

"You do not have to apologize to me. However, you do need to ask your mother's forgiveness. She should still be awake."

Snap, without trying to hide his expression, Takuma's eyes drifted all over the place as Takumi cut to the chase.

"Takuma, take the day off from school tomorrow."

"Father? What are you saying all of a sudden?"

Takuma's shocked expression was not feigned. He was truly bewildered by his father.

"Tomorrow, Congressman Kanda from the opposition party will be touring First High."

Takumi had predicted that his son would find this peculiar, so he directly started to explain his reasoning without wasting any time.

"Congressman Kanda from the opposition party, as in Kanda the human rights proponent and anti-magic supporter?"

"Correct. As well as his media underlings."

"For what reason?"

Even though Takuma asked this, he really already guessed the answer. After taking into account Congressman Kanda's recent statements that were highly publicized by the media, his purpose behind visiting First High was nigh apparent. Takuma's question was merely for verification purposes.

"He's putting on a show about protecting adolescents from being forcibly stripped of their freedoms by magic."

"Civil rights!?"

Even knowing this, Takuma couldn't help but spit that out. "No need for you to worry" was written clearly across his face.

"I understand what you're trying to say, but our opponent is a national congressman. Causing an incident would be very problematic."

His father's words caused an irate expression to appear over Takuma's face for an entirely different reason than before.

"Even if it's an irritating opponent, I'm not going to pick a fight without paying attention to the consequences. I'm not that childish."

"Even if they are picking a fight with you?"

"……Uh, of course. Would I be provoked that easily?"

Takumi relaxed and leaned deeply back into the sofa.

"Good. Since you speak so resolutely, then be prepared to bear responsibility for your words."

"I know that! That's all you have to say, right?"

Seeing these oft-repeated words and belligerent attitude, even someone other than Takumi would wonder if Takuma was truly "beyond provocation".

"Takuma, the situation is being handled by Saegusa-sama. Under no circumstances are you to do anything unnecessary."

Yet, this particular phrase from Takumi was not spoken out of concern for his son's attitude, but carefully timed instead.

"Saegusa!?"

As expected, Takuma displayed an intense reaction.

"Do not do anything unnecessary. You must bear responsibility for your own words."

Nonetheless, this was already after they had reached an accord.

"The Shippou Family will not interfere with this incident. You heard me, Takuma. That is the decision."

It's not like he could recant after all this,

"—I know!"

So Takuma had no choice but to reply in this fashion.

◊ ◊ ◊

They were unexpected visitors for practically everyone at First High, though they were probably also unwelcome visitors for everyone affiliated with First High.

Ten men and women disembarked from three pitch black limousines.

They were composed of Congressman Kanda, his secretary, reporters working for the congressman, and bodyguards.

During 4th period, the first class after noon, they suddenly demanded to meet with the principal. Of course, no appointment was made ahead of time. Generally speaking, they would be graciously rebuffed and sent to the door, but the status of a national congressman was such that they were able to do something tyrannical like this. In this regard, things had changed little from the previous century.

With Congressman Kanda wholly ignoring decorum and demanding an audience, the Dean Yaosaka of First High could only greet them with a sour expression on his face.

"Congressman Kanda, I have already said that Principal Momoyama is away on a business trip to Tokyo today. Please, would it be possible for you to come again when the principal is here?"

"Ho. Are you trying to dismiss I, Kanda, like a child and tell me to come again?"

"I dare not dismiss you like a child."

"Then the dean is fine as well. I wish to view the classes of your illustrious school in action."

"This is not something I can grant by myself. As I thought, you need to speak directly with the principal."

Kanda and Yaosaka were both in their fifties. At first glance and with a mind towards television appearances, Kanda appeared to be younger thanks to the efforts of makeup artists and plastic surgeons. However, upon closer inspection, Kanda also carried symptoms that befit his age. Though the two men were of the same age group, the sight of one overbearing side speaking with greater and greater fervor while the other side sweated and fretted away without daring to retaliate made for a hilarious sight despite its rather common frequency.

Speaking of which, Kanda knew from the very beginning that the principal was absent. Rather, it would be more precise to say that he invited himself specifically during the principal's absence.

The principal of First High, Momoyama Asuma, was 71 years of age. Since taking over as First High's principal until now, a full 11 years had elapsed. To the outside world, he was widely known for contributing greatly to the establishment of higher education for Magicians. However, at the same time, he was also criticized for neglecting the differences between Course 1 and 2 students, thus allowing the resulting negativity between the two camps to fester and grow. Still, the criticism leveled towards his responsibility in allowing the gap to grow only stayed at the level of whispers behind his back. Not just in magical education, Momoyama Asuma was also considered an authority in higher education, and his connections spanned across multiple fields. For Congressman Kanda, he was not someone he cared to cross swords with directly.

Wishing to successfully put on a performance while Momoyama was away, Kanda argued with Yaosaka, who was trying to prevent media coverage while the principal was away, as time gradually ticked away with Kanda holding the advantage. The dean would like nothing more than a result where time had expired. For Congressman Kanda, that result would be synonymous to "winning the battle and losing the war". Just as Kanda started to become agitated and was about to force the issue, a sound that imitated piano music resonated from the principal's office.

Accompanied by the sudden chime of a clock, the monitor on the wall covered with a famous Impressionist painting began running secretly. Swiftly, the image was transformed into a clear, real-time picture.

"Principal!? Aren't you in a meeting?"

The one who appeared on the screen that could forcibly exchange broadcast signals for receiving signals was Principal Momoyama, who should have been in a meeting with the Magic Association.

"I was able to make a little time available."

Only sparing a single sentence towards the dean's question, Principal Momoyama turned his gaze and stared at Kanda.

The image shown by the cameras installed at strategic locations at the four corners of the monitor gave the misconception that an actual person was standing there. Under Momoyama's piercing gaze, Kanda began to feel a little uneasy.

"So, Congressman Kanda. What is your business today?"

In the image, Momoyama kept his white hair groomed in the chonmage fashion and the bottom half of his face was covered by a pure white mustache and goatee. Unobscured by white hair, the area surrounding his eyes was sunken, rendering his expression difficult to decipher. Even so, the piercing gaze emanating from the depths of those sunken eye sockets perfectly conveyed the utter fury caused by this rude visitation with no room for misinterpretation.

"Ah, no, I humbly apologize for bothering you without making an appointment ahead of time."

Though this was more or less the same way he treated Yaosaka, this time Kanda tightened his abdomen when he replied.

"Since you are already aware of that, could you please change your visit to another day?"

Seizing hold of Kanda's words, Momoyama stepped his demand as if completely covering his words. Coming from the highest authority in the school, the words "visit another day" had even more weight than if he was here personally. Though Kanda's reflexes almost prompted him to nod, he barely managed to stop in time thanks to the reporters in his employ urgently whispering "congressman, congressman".

"Usually, I would have done as the principal had requested, but currently I have a thought of my own."

"Ho."

Momoyama maintained his solemn gaze as he urged him to speak further. Even through the camera, Kanda was still clearly being overwhelmed by Momoyama's aura, but his tongue was barely able to function.

"Recently, there have been some ugly rumors floating around society in regards to the curriculum here at the magic high school. Have the students at the nine magic high schools been brainwashed into becoming soldiers?"

"What a ridiculous notion."

His expression highly incensed, Momoyama fired back. He was just the principal of First High, so he had no authority to command all of the magic high schools, but the improvements he had made to the magic high school curriculum had all been adopted as the standard by the other 8 magic high

schools. As an educator, Momoyama was fiercely proud of the Magician developmental project that he had personally devised.

"Congressman Kanda, are you aware of our school's graduation statistics? For example, 65% of our graduates last year chose to attend the Magic University. Less than 10% of the students chose to attend College of National Defense."

Momoyama retaliated against Kanda with clearly defined metrics. However, Kanda replied back to the retaliation with a delighted smile as if he had been waiting for that move for quite some time.

"Yet, after researching the advancement of the Magic University graduates, 45% chose a job related to the JSDF. If combined with the students who enrolled in the College of National Defense after graduating high school, more than half of the students educated in the magic high schools become affiliated with the JSDF."

Seeing Kanda wearing an expression that fairly crowed at unleashing his trap, Momoyama never wavered.

"That's merely the paths they have chosen for themselves. In the final year at Magic University, they are mature adults capable of making their decisions. Even small interjections from the wayside cannot cause any meaningful effect."

"Of course."

For some reason, Kanda nodded gravely at Momoyama's argument.

"My thoughts are perfectly aligned with what the principal said. Precisely because of this, I have come to inspect the school in order to erase the irresponsible impression that magic high schools are nothing more than a developmental camp for the military."

Kanda's unspoken words were that he was going to spread propaganda about the magic high school's impression in the manner of his choosing. For the wily Momoyama, a ploy on such a level was never going to slip by him.

"What a headache. Technical Skills classes for magic are extremely delicate. A sudden visit may cause a disturbance among the students."

"I definitely won't cause you any trouble."

At this point, Kanda's attitude hardened. Rather than him recapturing his original pace, it was more appropriate to say this feeling was as if he had grown stubborn because he couldn't beat Momoyama.

"…...If you say it like that then I will grant you permission to observe."

After making the motions to pretend that he had considered this for a while, Momoyama adopted the stance of approving Kanda's request. Heedless of the openly thunderstruck and bewildered Dean Yaosaka, Momoyama continued speaking in a tone that brooked no refusal.

"However, you are only allowed to observe from the fifth period onward."

"That…… No, that's fine."

Kanda was about to object to the unexpected condition out of reflex, but since he had already said that he "definitely won't cause trouble", he was in no position to make any objections.

"Dean, which classes are scheduled for Technical Skills classes during fifth period?"

Feigning ignorance to Kanda's internal battle, Momoyama asked this question to Yaosaka.

The mixed feelings of surprise and bewilderment in Yaosaka were exchanged for complete amazement. That was because even without Yaosaka's reply, Momoyama usually had a perfect grasp of the class schedules for every class across all years.

"There is no class scheduled for Technical Skills during fifth period."

Even so, his current situation did not allow him to question this and only allowed him to answer the question posed. Yaosaka replied back to the question asked of him.

"However, excluding official class schedules, the students from Year 2 Class E have requested to conduct an extracurricular experiment in the school quad."

"It's just as you heard, Congressman Kanda. It looks like you're better off coming another day."

"That cannot be! Then at the very least, allow me to observe halfway through fourth period."

Accommodating their schedule on another day would allow Momoyama to make all the necessary preparations ahead of time. Principal Momoyama also had close connections with the opposition party that Kanda was a part of. Clearly, their forced visitation today was a surprise attack because he feared Momoyama's influence, which was an advantage he wouldn't have if he came another day.

Kanda had backed down because he had this in mind, but now he had already agreed.

"Congressman Kanda. In the middle of an experiment, students will lose their concentration and be distracted by microphones and cameras. In the worst case scenario, students can even suffer irreparable harm due to failure in magic. Nor would any teacher wish for something like this to occur."

At the end of the day, Kanda was an outsider when it came to magic. He had no basis to refute Momoyama's words. Just as Kanda used students as an excuse, he didn't dare to cause a ruckus that might ruin a student's future.

"……I understand. In this case, even if it's an extracurricular experiment, please allow me to attend."

"I see. Dean, summon Smith-sensei and have her guide Congressman Kanda."

Highly frustrated, this was the only thing Kanda could say. Without betraying any glee, Principal Momoyama gave these orders to Dean Yaosaka and cut the connection.

After fifth period began, one of the reporters in Kanda's employ began whispering to him while Jennifer was leading them to the radiation lab that was being prepared.

"Congressman, don't you think something is odd?"

"What are you referring to?"

The voice Kanda responded with was low with displeasure, but the reporter paid no mind as he continued.

"The fact that there was not a single Technical Skills class. It's almost as if they knew we were coming."

"Nonsense…… It's just a coincidence. They should have no idea about our movements. After all, I didn't even report this to the party."

"But, this coverage was a little strange from the get go. Usually, any media coverage related to magic would immediately draw interference even during the planning phase, but no one spoke up this time."

Just as Kanda was about to reply that this was natural, he suddenly quieted. The reason why the Magic Association didn't interfere today was because steps were taken at the highest level within the association. Though the helping hand remained anonymous, Kanda was more or less able to guess their identity. With that in mind, it was true that several points became suspicious.

Though Kanda was acting as an anti-magic supporter, he wasn't of the belief that Magicians were inhuman creatures. In reality, he acknowledged the benefits Magicians posed. His political agenda involved championing anti-magic sentiment in front of the media. With a little fiery rhetoric that was popular with the masses, Magicians could come under serious fire. The one acting behind the scenes to ensure that today's coverage (the political propaganda with this as the goal) remained free of interference understood this, hence Kanda was tacitly approved by this mysterious benefactor to engage in this demagogy to prevent politicians who truly hated Magicians from seizing power.

Yet, was this reason sufficient to allow them to turn a blind eye to his anti-magic demonstration? If it was truly that person, then it was highly likely that he would use him as a political tool to the fullest. However, that did not guarantee that everyone in the Ten Master Clans saw eye to eye in this.

While he was ruminating on this and the reporters who were serving as his underlings fretted, their group with Jennifer in the lead arrived at the radiation lab.

As Kanda and company stepped into the radiation lab, they abruptly came to a halt when they detected unfriendly eyes on them. The icy gazes directed towards them from the students making preparations in the lab were almost as if they knew that they were coming. Yet, that only lasted for

an instant as the students seemed to completely forget about the politician and his coterie and directed all of their attention to the task at hand. No matter if it was Kanda or the reporters, they all got the feeling that the earlier cold gazes sent their way seemed to be misconceptions.

"Smith-sensei, these people are?"

The one who spoke up – the only one who showed any sign of caring - was Tsuzura, who was currently overseeing the students.

"Congressman Kanda and several reporters on tour of the school."

"A national congressman is one thing, but why are there reporters accompanying him? Media coverage on campus requires permits approved ahead of time. I have heard absolutely nothing about this."

Kanda's face almost crumbled when the handsome man who, even at first glance, carried himself with a scholarly air swept a surprisingly sharp gaze over him.

"The principal has granted permission."

Fortunately, Kanda had no need to answer Tsuzura's question as Jennifer replied for him.

"I thought the principal was away on business."

"He made some time and communicated this over the phone."

"I see."

Both Kanda and the reporters under his employ were mildly dissatisfied with how easily Tsuzura accepted such a simple answer. Still, compared with groundless enmity, this was a far easier way to go about their business. Convincing himself to accept this, Kanda struck up a conversation with Tsuzura.

"I apologize for interrupting your class."

"Hardly, this isn't my class actually."

But haven't you set your sights on us? Though they heard the sound of someone unable to hold back a snort of laughter, by the time they turned their eyes towards the students, they were all working away with serious expressions on their faces, leaving no way to tell who laughed. Kanda

drew deeply within himself to suppress the mounting rage that had nowhere to go as he spoke to Tsuzura again.

"I heard this is an extracurricular experiment. What are they planning to do?"

"The students have volunteered to conduct an experiment that is not covered by the curriculum."

In response to Tsuzura playing dumb (in Kanda's eyes), Kanda had to take deep breaths to control his frustration.

"What kind of experiment is it?"

This question was posed by one of the reporters. The reason why Tsuzura turned a disapproving look on that reporter was because he had failed to present himself. However, no response to the reporter's question or question directed towards the reporter's name was formulated here.

"Sensei, we have finished our preparations. May we move the experimental device?"

As the leader of the experiment, Isori contacted Tsuzura and happened to interrupt the conversation between the reporter and Tsuzura.

"……Hm, you may."

Using an information terminal the size of an A4, Tsuzura verified the checklist that Isori passed along and gave his approval. In response, the members of the robotics club responsible for support only replied back that they had been waiting forever before beginning to operate the controls on the wall.

Throughout all this, Kanda's expression remained unchanged, but his underlings' eyes bulged in shock.

The wall of the radiation lab opened without a sound.

This was just a tunnel used to transport large machines, but seeing one wall of a windowless lab soundlessly yawning open gave off vibes usually found with a secret base.

Still, this feeling only came from personnel from the outside, as the students had long since tired of this sight and began pushing a pedestal holding a spherical sink measuring 2 meters in diameter that was half filled

with a combination of heavy and light water (the other half was filled with steam) before the wall opened completely. Despite using the word push, the pedestal was equipped with a motor, rendering movement a piece of cake so long as the proper direction was provided. One by one, the students left for the school quad, with Tsuzura following afterwards.

"Let's go."

With those words from Jennifer, Congressman Kanda and the reporters frantically hurried to catch up.

"Speaking of which, why isn't an official experiment being conducted during class time? Is this common?"

"Infrequently."

In response to the question coming from the reporter who hurried to catch up, Tsuzura gave a cold reply. However, he must have felt that such a reply was too inhospitable and immediately expanded his explanation.

"Based on the original plan, this experiment was supposed to be conducted after school. However, since quite a few faculty members who knew about the details wanted their own students to participate, we temporarily put a hold on all Technical Skills classes so that all the interested students can freely participate. Holding the experiment on school grounds also came from the same reason."

"Is this an experiment proposed by the students?"

Another reporter asked in disbelief.

"Actually, this experiment will be highly meaningful from both the theoretical and practical perspectives."

"In terms of practical, you are talking about something like the secret weapon used during the 'Scorched Halloween' that could one shot an entire enemy fleet?"

Tsuzura cast a chilly gaze on the reporter who wore a mocking smile as he asked this.

"This experiment is intended to challenge one of the three Great Puzzles of Gravity-Type Magic."

After leaving this answer, Tsuzura walked towards the students gathered beneath the spherical water sink.

The reporter attempted to inquire further from Jennifer, but she beat him to the punch.

"It's starting."

Maybe due to their professional instincts as journalists, all of their attention was drawn towards the experimental device fastened in the school quad by the school buildings to the side.

The experimental device known as the Stellar Furnace was composed of a simple design that had a spherical water sink on top of a pedestal. The water pump had already been removed in the radiation lab. Metallic cups 15cm across were attached to the equator of the water sink, to which four rods extending from the pedestal supported these metallic cups. The water entry point directly above was stoppered by a circular pan 30cm across the diameter and a similar pan was affixed on the other side.

The experimental device attracted the attention of many a student standing in the windows of the school dorm. Practically all the classrooms had abandoned any pretense of actually studying. Predicting that this would happen, most of the faculty had halted Technical Skills classes and switched to terminal lectures.

Students who were unsatisfied with standing by the windows also came downstairs to the quad. The entire Year 2 Class E as well as the Student Council members who were not part of the experiment were all in attendance. Likewise, previous members of last year's Year 1 Class E as well as all the female participants from last year's Nine Schools Competition were present as well. Beyond the students, quite a few teachers were also here.

"Commence the experiment."

The one on the mike was Tatsuya. All the students gathered in the quad fell silent without another word. Swallowing hard, the students and faculty looked on in wonder as Tatsuya gave the signal.

"Gravity control."

Miyuki activated Gravity Control-Type Magic. A gravitational field formed in the interior of the water sink as the mixed water that was half heavy water and half light water became hollow in the center, pushing the water outward towards the inside of the water sink.

"Ionization."

Kasumi and Izumi activated Shift Magic – Dispersal-Type Magic. Transforming liquid into the fourth phase, which was essentially ionization magic.

On the surface of the water with a hollow center formed by Miyuki's Gravity Control-Type Magic, Miyuki deftly manipulated the mixed water within the influence of the gravitational field to create deuterium, hydrogen, and oxygen ions.

"Neutron Barrier. Gamma Ray Filter."

Minami added the Neutron Barrier between the magic area of the Gravity Control-Type Magic and the magic area formed by the Shift Magic. As its name implies, Neutron Barrier was a type of magic that generated a field that prevented neutrons from rebounding.

On top of that, Honoka inserted the Gamma Ray Filter between the Neutron Barrier and the Fourth Phase Shift Field. Gamma Ray Filter was a type of magic that gathered the heat energy from gamma rays and expressed it as visible light.

Both Gamma Ray Filter and Neutron Barrier were classified as Dispersal-Type Magic. Dispersal-Type Magic was defined as magic that interfered with the movement and interaction of elementary and composite particles. Magic that manipulated gamma rays was categorized as Dispersal-Type Magic because the magic interfered with light particles, but on some level this was a later classification. These two magics were originally developed to neutralize the danger of nuclear fission weapons and the two of them were researched together in most situations. For ease of research, Gamma Ray Filter and Neutron Barrier were both categorized together.

"Gravity Control."

Miyuki began activating the second Gravity Control-Type Magic. In the center of the spherical water sink, a heavy gravitational field that was 10cm

in diameter appeared. To be precise, a new gravitational field was created within the spherical area that was 10cm across and acted against the original Gravity Control-Type Magic pulling outwards by pulling towards the center, hereby amplifying matter's mutual gravitational attraction.

As for the metallic cups attached to the equator of the water sink, they were composed of 60 Specialized CADs linked together as a sighting assistance device. The cup-shape allowed the sighting assistance device to accurately translate the physical data and distributed condition in the empty space 10cm in diameter at the center of the spherical water sink into information that aided magic casting. This information was passed along the wires inside the pillars that supported the water sink into the operating device, which happened to be the large, fixed CAD that sat in front of Miyuki for this experiment.

With processing power that dwarfed mobile CADs, the fixed CAD aggregated the data from the 60 sighting assistance devices and sent the Activation sequence to the caster. Thanks to this information, Miyuki was able to devise Gravity Control-Type Magic that was able to counteract the shifting energy within the gravitational field and implement it. Of course, this was only possible with her Magic Power as a prerequisite. Still, without the repeated gravitational field technique developed through Flying-Type Magic and the precise sighting assistance device that combined all 60 data sets, even Miyuki would not be able to continuously maintain such a stable, heavy gravitational field. This sighting assistance device was the key cog for the "Stellar Furnace" experimental device.

"Coulomb Force Control."

Thanks to Isori exerting control over Coulomb Force, the electromagnetic repulsion within the field was lowered to 1/10000. The electromagnetic force among the particles in the nucleus of the deuterium atom was 10^36. When that electromagnetic force was lowered to 1/10000, gravity became 100 times greater than normal, hereby preventing nuclear fusion. However, there was enough thermal energy gathered to spontaneously ignite a nuclear fusion reaction, meaning that the kinetic energy of the ions had decreased. For that matter, just the rise in pressure caused by ionization was sufficient to meet reaction requirements.

A dim light appeared. A wordless shout emitted from the students observing the experiment. The brightness gradually grew stronger as the light continued for a minute, then two minutes.

The water within the spherical water sink began boiling furiously. The theory behind this experimentally gathered thermal energy was the same as magnetic confinement thermonuclear reactors. By hitting neutrons with a decelerator, the kinetic energy of the neutrons could be converted into thermal energy. In terms of the design for this sort of nuclear fusion reactor, structural weakening due to constant exposure to neutron radiation was a problem that must be overcome in order to directly bathe the thermal energy gathering device within high speed neutrons. Structural weakening due to exposure to neutron radiation became the defining threshold for creating a practical and enduring thermonuclear reactor. However, in this experiment, water was used as the decelerator for neutrons and the hollow sphere formed of water completely encompassed energy from the reaction, hereby removing the problem of having the neutron radiation pass through a vessel to hit the decelerator. This design was also a highly effective countermeasure to the structural weakening of the walls. Gravity control turned the possibility of creating an empty sphere within the water a reality.

The digital thermometer set alongside the spherical water sink showed that the mixed water boiling inside had reached 300 degrees. The air pressure within the sphere could be calculated to be 100 atmospheres. Although gravity control could prevent the device from falling apart regardless of how high the internal pressure rose, the vessel's endurance was about to reach its limit.

"Experiment concluded."

Three minutes after the start of the experiment, a declaration announcing the end of the experiment was issued from Tatsuya's lips. The Coulomb Force Control-Type Magic and the second Gravity Control-Type Magic were halted and the light within the experimental device faded.

"Disabling Gamma Ray Filter."

After verifying that the nuclear fusion reaction had halted, the Gamma Ray Filter used to capture the neutron's gamma rays was also disabled.

"Disabling Gravity Control, maintain Neutron Barrier."

The wall of water covering the inside of the vessel succumbed to Earth's gravity and fell to the bottom of the vessel.

Operable arms from the robotics club connected a cable to the top of the spherical vessel. The front end of the cable contained a gas analyzer. After opening the lid, gas within the vessel quickly flowed towards the analyzer on account of the difference in pressure.

"Gaseous composition includes steam, deuterium, hydrogen, and oxygen. No deuterium ions or other radioactive compounds have been detected!"

Sitting in front of the analyzer, a highly excited Kento gave a simple report of the findings. Despite calling it simple, so long as there were no calculation errors, there would be no chance of missing anything. This caused an excited ruckus to ripple through those assembled here to observe the proceedings.

"Begin adding water."

Following Tatsuya's orders, a malleable water hose was connected to the cable and began pumping cold water into the receptacle. Thick steam began to be emitted from the inside of the spherical water sink, but the steam swiftly faded away to reveal a water sink full of transparent water.

"Disabling Neutron Barrier."

Tatsuya directed a grateful look at Minami, who was in the process of lowering her shoulders, before directing his gaze towards Honoka, Kasumi, Izumi, and Miyuki in that order. Finally, he and Isori caught each other's eyes and nodded before Tatsuya passed the microphone into Asuza's hands, as she had been diligently observing the various recording devices until now.

Shaking her head repeatedly, Azusa tried multiple times to press the microphone back to his hands. However, unable to withstand Isori's smile and Tatsuya's wordless pressure, Azusa wore a tear stricken expression as she accepted the microphone.



After taking many deep breaths, Azusa moved the microphone to her lips. Adopting a determined expression – though it seemed more like a self-destructive expression – she made her declaration to the assembled students who had witnessed this entire process.

"The sustainable thermonuclear experiment using continuous Gravity Control-Type Magic as its core has reached the expected goal. I hereby declare the 'Stellar Furnace' experiment to be a success."

Both the quad and the dorms were filled with cheers at the same time. The fervent cheers that could be described as a tad volatile were also the cries that heralded both the possibilities and future of "magic".

Overcome by the students' cheers, Congressman Kanda and his reporters stood completely frozen and it was only when the spherical water sink was being brought back into the radiation lab and the students were filtering out of the quad back to their classes that they finally recovered their wits.

"What was that just now?"

In a voice quaking with fear, one of the reporters asked of Tsuzura and Jennifer, who were deep in their own conversation.

"That experiment was about the continuous Gravity Control-Type Magic thermonuclear reactor."

However, a literal question received a literal answer. The reporter's voice grew rougher due to his agitation, but Kanda, as expected of someone who had survived the double-dealing world of politicians, was not so easily ruffled.

"What is that thing? Didn't they give up on a practical thermonuclear reactor?"

That was Kanda's question,

"Who said gave up on?"

"Gave up on what?"

And those were replies given at the same time by Tsuzura and Jennifer. The two exchanged a glance after their voices overlapped before Jennifer once again opened her mouth.

"We never gave up. We just set its priority below finishing a solar energy system first. Although research on a large-scale experimental device was halted due to budget issues, the topic itself continues on even in fields other than magic."

Although they heard a snide "Ho, is that so" slip out of Tsuzura's mouth, both Kanda and Jennifer ignored him.

"Using magic to conduct thermonuclear research is also a part of this. Thermonuclear reactors using electromagnetic magic were abandoned due to its complexity, but in comparison, the new thermonuclear reactors relying on Gravity Control-Type magic continue to be researched in the world of magic theory."

"When you say research on thermonuclear reactors, is that so you can create a viable thermonuclear detonation through magic?"

"Such as the one used during the 'Scorched Halloween'?"

The questions posed by the two reporters were filled with malice, causing Jennifer to wrinkle her brow.

Nevertheless, barbed indictments did not fall from her lips.

"HA HA HA HA……"

Tsuzura's insolent laughter removed Jennifer's sting and slightly terrified the reporters.

"Thermonuclear detonation? Pray indulge my question, but what were you just observing?"

The unnatural usage of the two-fold niceties was an intentionally impolite jab. Even an imperceptive individual could tell that the words literally meant "are your eyes just for show?". This man who bears the name Tsuzura not only had an arrogant attitude but also carried a sarcastic personality.

"Creating a miniature explosion doesn't even require such a complex magical combination, nor would the giant explosion you guys are talking about use one either. Furthermore, the only successful example of a large scale thermonuclear explosion comes from the Brazilian Army's Miguel Diaz and his Strategic-Class "Synchronized Linear Fusion" Magic. No one else has been able to recreate Diaz's ability. Even with the countless

talented students at our school, did you really think such a thing is possible?"

Heightened displeasure had contorted the reporters' faces. They were aware that their opponent was the expert and they were only outsiders. In addition, they were completely ignorant on how difficult "Synchronized Linear Fusion" was. If there was only one successful example in the world, then there was no way they could forcibly stretch this to include high school students even at the experimental level.

Yet, they had long since grown accustomed to this level of sarcasm. The source of this expected displeasure was the dismissive attitude that treated the reporters like common rabble. Not only Tsuzura, the reporters felt that the dean, the principal, the female teacher standing over there, and even the students never bothered to treat these messengers of public opinion with any sort of respect.

"Today's thermonuclear experiment was aimed at the energy sources that are the foundation of society. Although there are quite a few more hurdles left to circumvent, if this Stellar Furnace becomes more practical, then it will probably provide a more abundant source of energy than solar energy."

Tsuzura kept his eyes on Kanda as he said this. Even if they were unwilling to accept this, the reporters knew from the bottom of their hearts that they were nothing in Tsuzura's eyes.

"What do you think, Congressman Kanda? Our students have a fine spirit of peaceful, civic contribution, do they not?"

"You are…… quite right. I think that their proactive attitude towards the betterment of society should be commended."

Maybe he had a switch somewhere, but in the face of Tsuzura's brazen tour de force, Kanda could only nod his head unwillingly.

In response, Tsuzura revealed a fake smile and bowed towards Kanda.

"Thank you very much, Congressman Kanda. I will record the words you just spoke. I'm sure you will not object, in the name of fostering students' motivation?"

"No, that's……"

"Surely there's no problem?"

"Ah, no, there would be nothing better if I could help out these children."

Keeping his eyes averted, Kanda politely nodded and left this simple sentence before quitting the field. Not just the school quad, but First High altogether. He remembered that above all else, it would be terrible if he came out on record with statements that ran counter to his original intent, so today he would have to temporarily retreat.

Without a god to worship, one could not remain at the festival. Abandoning the triumphal parade was the only choice as the reporters could only bring their coverage of First High to a grinding halt.

Jennifer watched the congressman's party responsible for this disturbance leave and once they were out of sight, immediately spoke to Tsuzura.

"Tsuzura-sensei."

Completely immersed in Japanese culture, Jennifer was in no way different than a Japanese person save for her appearances alone. When referring to her colleagues, she used "sensei" and not "Mr.".

"Didn't you go a little too far?"

Still, putting it so politely was also distinctly Japanese. Being brutally honest would surely be chalked up as an American bias.

"Eh, sorry about that display."

Tsuzura seemed to be a little embarrassed at being pointed out.

"I couldn't help but get a little angry when I saw our students' good intentions being misconstrued."

"Intention…… is it?"

It wasn't that she was unfamiliar with the meaning behind those words. To be honest, Jennifer knew Tsuzura since Magic University. Though Jennifer was quite a few years older, their position at the Magic University was the same – they were research colleagues. Also, by the strictest terms, they were colleagues on an excellent footing. The reason why Jennifer was shocked by Tsuzura's words was because this wasn't like him. Though

Tsuzura was acknowledged as a weirdo by everyone at First High, that was only because his personality was the type that abandoned anything unnecessary to the extreme degree. Usually, he was not someone who acknowledged the value of something emotional like "intention". For the typical Tsuzura, "motivation" and "objectivity" were things to be dissected and not valued. It was precisely because Jennifer was aware of this that her question slipped inadvertently from her lips.

In that regard, Tsuzura himself was aware. The reason why he was embarrassed was because he felt that words like "intention" didn't suit him.

"Well, that…… From a technical standpoint, this experiment is still a little immature. It was overly reliant on the individuals' magical prowess. Success was only achieved due to the members selected, so there are still many problems that need to be solved prior to actualization."

Jennifer nodded in agreement to Tsuzura's points. She held the exact same opinion.

"However, I believe that his willingness to use magic to challenge the status quo of society contains a value that is completely unrelated to this technique's completion. I believe that the intention to face society and change its perceptions is valuable beyond compare."

Maybe because he was unable to hide his shame any longer, Tsuzura added the words "Despite how unsuitable these words are for me" before averting his gaze.

Chapter 14

Thursday, April 26th. While riding the train to school, Tatsuya wore a slight "Oh?" expression when he engaged in his customary practice of pulling out the information terminal and scanning the news.

"Onii-sama, is there something on the news that drew your attention?"

The alteration in his facial expression was minute as usual, but as usual, even this was not enough to escape Miyuki's eyes.

Sitting in a seat across from Miyuki, Minami raised her head. Any emotional expression on her part was more cautious and not a true poker face. The gaze Minami sent Tatsuya's way also declared her interest in the question Miyuki posed for Tatsuya.

"It's just regarding the experiment you two helped out with yesterday."

Tatsuya turned his face towards Miyuki sitting by his side and spoke in a volume sufficient to allow Minami sitting diagonally across from him to hear.

"I had already anticipated that both positive and negative news would appear today. However, I feel that there are more positive responses than negative."

Miyuki's eyes and expression clearly asked "What is strange about that?" as she urged Tatsuya onward.

"Setting aside the national congressmen who has an ear to the wind, I didn't think that a demonstration of that level could cause reporters from major newspapers to capitulate. Here I thought they would stubbornly continue to compose more news with one-sided appraisal. To be honest, I had planned to use this line as a trap for those manipulating public opinion."

Hearing Tatsuya's confession, Miyuki's eyes widened as if to say "Really".

"Now that we're at this point…… However, Onii-sama, you're evil."

Though Miyuki was not earnestly criticizing him, Tatsuya had long since come to the conclusion that he had no other choice but to chuckle wryly in situations like these. –On the other hand, Minami seemed honestly stunned.

"As I suspected, the writing in these articles is simply ridiculous……"

As he said this, Tatsuya showed Miyuki the screen of the information terminal he was holding. The headline was "Magic high school students challenging water explosion experiments" and, compared to major newspapers, this smacked even more of yellow journalism aimed at inciting the entire city.

"Even I could not predict this."

While saying this, Tatsuya removed the displayed news article and another chain of articles appeared on the information terminal's screen.

"—Challenge of youths, facing the 22nd century – eh? Looks to be a special bulletin from this newsgroup. Are they writing about what happened yesterday?"

Miyuki must have shared Tatsuya's surprise as she tilted her head to ask him. This bulletin was organized by subject and contained the positive news about the revolutionary undertakings attempted by the youth. This was clearly incompatible with the subject of inciting anti-magic sentiment.

"Ah. Yesterday, a reporter from this newsgroup also came, so it should come as no surprise that this was posted. Yet, I recall that this bulletin was completely covered by the anti-magic movement until yesterday……"

"Have they had a change of heart thanks to Onii-sama's Stellar Furnace?"

In comparison to the absolutely bewildered expression on Tatsuya's face, Miyuki's tone seemed to imply that this was perfectly natural.

"……That is a possibility if this reporter was interested in novel things or this resonated personally with them. Given that this is a bulletin, it does not necessarily preclude the possibility that everyone in the editorial department also shares this sentiment."

Tatsuya understood that organizations were things that could not be closely united and the greater the organization, the greater the inclination of fracturing, and he also had personal experience in this matter. There were situations where one department went off the rails in regards to the company's policy, so Tatsuya tentatively accepted this outcome for the moment.

In truth, things were not so simple. Among the major newspapers that were uniformly anti-magic, yesterday's experiment did prove to be one of the catalysts that caused the appearance of perspectives in support of magic. The fact that a national congressman was surprised and acknowledged the magic high school students was also a newsworthy event for more than a few newscasters, but of course that wasn't all that happened.

Tsuzura's recording of Congressman Kanda's declaration was passed along to the congressman himself thanks to an assistant from his time at the Magic University. In addition, there was also a roundabout request to slightly curb his activities. A major reason why this recording wasn't shown on the newspapers was of course thanks to the reporters working for him.

Furthermore, Principal Momoyama lodged a serious complaint with the upper echelons of the opposition party in regards to the unannounced visitation on campus with reporters in tow, forcing Congressman Kanda and other congressmen also in the anti-magic camp to temporarily lower the scale of their activities. From a certain perspective, Principal Momoyama made full use of Tatsuya's little ploy.

In addition, there was also supporting fire coming from the private sector.

"Hey, look, Tatsuya. This interview is still being shown."

During lunch in the cafeteria, Leo pointed his index finger at the recommended news image being displayed on the wall monitor. Without bothering to look in the direction Leo was pointing, Tatsuya continued to silently dine.

"It's quite rare for the Rozen side to voluntarily appear on the news in Japan, Onii-sama."

However, just because he could ignore Leo, that didn't mean that Tatsuya was able to deny Miyuki.

"Given that someone bearing the Rozen name has been assigned to Japan, a major policy change may be afoot."

Paying heed to avoid looking towards Erika and Mikihiko, Tatsuya replied in a carefree manner.

Of the 16 widescreen monitors on the wall, four of them were broadcasting the interview with Einst Rozen, CEO of Rozen Magicraft's Japanese

branch. On the screen, Einst Rozen was answering the newscaster's questions in fluent Japanese.

"—I never thought that high school students would be able to wield such high level magic. I am astounded by the level of Japanese magical techniques."

"Isn't he applauding you guys?"

"……"

Completely unlike her usual flair, Erika had remained silent since the very beginning. In comparison, though this was not exactly the right way to put it, Tatsuya once again ignored Leo's merry attempt to engage him in conversation.

"After seeing the successful experiment conducted by students at First High yesterday, I caught a glimpse of how the techniques and possibilities of magic can bring about greater prosperity to mankind."

"Incredible. He even said the prosperity of mankind."

Seeing Shizuku frankly express, without any ulterior motive, her amazement to this recognition, Tatsuya once again blandly replied "That was thanks to everyone's hard work".

"Hm, both Miyuki and Honoka were amazing."

"I, I didn't do anything that impressive……"

Watching the ruckus brewing between Shizuku and Honoka, Tatsuya was caught between contemplating "what is Rozen's goal here?" and surprised that "they appear to be wise enough to make sure that the names of the high school students were not revealed".

◊ ◊ ◊

Though unexpected, the various positive responses garnered by the Stellar Furnace experiment significantly lifted the spirits of the students at First High. Even if they were not the ones responsible, they were still students at the same school acknowledged by society. Even if this was a superficial manner, the desire to be recognized at their tender age was satisfied upon recognition being bestowed on the group they belonged to.

During 5th period, or shortly after the end of the last period after lunch. In Year 1 Class A, Takuma was preparing to head for Club Activities Group after class when an unpleasant conversation resounded in his ear for the umpteenth time. The topics his female classmates were conversing about were the CEO of Rozen Magicraft's Japanese branch, Einst Rozen, as well as the comments the CEO made yesterday. Other female students in class were also clamoring to join the experiment. Takuma suddenly rose to his feet, without paying any heed towards masking his agitated mood. Noticing Takuma's sudden, sinister burst, the chatting girls halted their conversation.

The reason behind his attitude was because the class's atmosphere was too giddy. Plainly, students from Class A had not directly participated in yesterday's experiment. Kasumi and Minami were from Class C, Izumi was from Class B, and Class A didn't send any supporting personnel to operate the machines. That being said, after receiving high marks from the cadre of a world-famous corporation, almost all of the students were as excited as if they were the ones responsible for this feat. That is to say, every student save Takuma himself.

Damn it, while that thought ran through Takuma's mind, he was unable to finely control his own emotions at this time. Praise directed towards the Saegusa Family – that was what he believed – or whatever it was had exhausted all of Takuma's patience. Finally, without any word to excuse himself, Takuma left the classroom as if fleeing.

Takuma's rotten mood failed to dissipate even during his time at the Club Group Activities HQ. His techniques were a mess thanks to his lack of concentration, causing his stress to amplify as he failed at things that normally posed no challenge to him. After school, Takuma's agitation had reached a peak.

For Takuma, today was an unlucky day.

After retrieving his own CAD from storage in the office, Takuma ran into Kasumi wearing her Public Moral Committee bracelet in the school quad on the way home.

After club invitation week, members of the Public Moral Committee returned to duties by shift. Generally, patrols were conducted by one person alone, and this was no exception even for new students, thus Kasumi was alone. After taking the time into account, she was probably on

her way back to headquarters. This is why there was nothing odd in Kasumi passing a cursory glance over Takuma before passing by him. In all likelihood, what transpired next was the product of Takuma's inferiority complex.

"Looks like everything is going according to plan, Saegusa."

Takuma believed that Kasumi was mocking him.

"……What are you referring to?"

Kasumi coming to a stop and turning around with a shocked look on her face was not an act.

However, in the eyes of Takuma and with all the leftover stress from his father's careful reminder from two nights ago, Kasumi was playing dumb.

Continuing along this misunderstanding, Takuma vented all of his frustration on Kasumi.

"I'm talking about yesterday's public experiment. Haven't you even won the attention of the Rozen branch CEO?"

"Public experiment? Shippou-kun, is there a misunderstanding somewhere?"

Kasumi was most definitely not a young girl of genteel personality. Even if she pretended to be an obedient child, her nature was that of someone who got into fights easily. Never taking the dark and treacherous route, she was someone who walked beneath the daylight. Here, she had no intention of hiding her displeasure at the malice lurking within Takuma's words.

"Stop playing dumb. You knew ahead of time that a national congressman hostile to Magicians was coming, so that's why you put on a show yesterday, right? You clearly took advantage of Shiba-senpai and successfully bolstered your own fame."

"You said took advantage of? Don't even think of bullshitting your way into this."

Kasumi's response grew coarse. Although Takuma's point regarding their forewarning about Congressman Kanda's arrival was true, Takuma also fully believed in his speculation.

"How careless of me. That guy's reputation goes beyond this school and extends even into the 9 schools. As expected of the Saegusa, leaving nothing to chance. After your older sister, are you the one to seduce him? After all, you siblings are unimpeachable when it comes to appearances."

"Stop joking around!"

Kasumi suddenly exploded. This force was sufficient to silence Takuma for a while. Still, blood rushed to Kasumi's head for only a second.

"…...Seduce, eh. The Shippou line of thinking is certainly debased. We, the Saegusa, haven't even considered something like seduction. You aren't too bad looking yourself, so why don't you go serve as some Magician's gigolo? Though, anyone who would want a gigolo in this day and age would probably have to be a lecherous entertainer."

This time, it was Takuma's turn to color in fury.

Kasumi's metaphor did not contain a more profound meaning. The term lecherous entertainer referred to the recent news heatedly talked about over the porn websites about the liaison between a certain veteran actress and a young man that Kasumi heard a passing reference to. She wasn't using the term "gigolo" specifically because it referred to a mature woman's younger lover, but merely because she wanted to borrow the term from the headlines.

However, for Takuma, that term seemed to be mocking his relationship with Sawamura Maki.

"……Are you picking a fight with me, Saegusa?"

"I believe it was you, Shippou, who fired the first shot. Furthermore, have you already forgotten? I have already said that I will fully play along until I grind you into the dust, until you never dare to pick a fight with the Saegusa again."

Takuma and Kasumi glared at one another. Both their respective right hands grabbed their left sleeves. Both of them used the same bracelet-shaped CADs. The two of them had far surpassed the point of no return.

"You two over there! What do you think you're doing!?"

"You two, drop your hands now!"

Nevertheless, just as the two of them were about to manipulate their CADs, voices originating from behind them called out for them to stop.

The voice behind Takuma belonged to a male student.

The voice to the rear of Kasumi came from a female student.

Takuma pulled back the left sleeve with his right hand as he turned around.

On the other hand, Kasumi dropped her right hand and turned.

In Takuma's field of vision, a slightly familiar-looking upperclassman reached his right hand towards his left breast with a serious expression.

He was planning on pulling out the pistol-shaped CAD stored in the shoulder holster, Takuma judged.

Takuma's counterattack was all reflex.

His right hand touched the CAD's power switch.

The upperclassman who was his opponent also drew his CAD.

I won, just as Takuma thought this,

Wobbling from being struck by concussive waves from the front and back of his body, Takuma was knocked unconscious as he fell to his knees.

Detecting the signs of magic being activated behind her, Kasumi couldn't help but turn around. While she understood that unnecessary movement in her current predicament was not a wise choice, she couldn't ignore the activation of combat magic even if the target was not herself.

The ones who planned on using magic were the opponent she was previously in a standoff with, Shippou Takuma, and the Public Moral Committee member, Morisaki-senpai – by the time Kasumi realized this, magic had already been activated.

The first one to activate was Morisaki's magic. Although the influence of Takuma's Data Fortification lowered the strength quite a bit, Morisaki was still able to activate magic that caused severe shaking in front and behind

the body, so from the standpoint of interrupting Takuma's attack, he was entirely successful.

"Drawless……"

Slightly shocked, Kasumi involuntarily murmured this. It was obvious that Takuma was quicker at preparing his CAD. Specialized CADs were faster than Generalized CADs, but under those circumstances, Takuma should still have been faster regardless of the speed difference between Specialized and Generalized CADs. That was because Morisaki should have had to follow the "draw, aim" process.

Yet, prior to drawing the CAD from the holster, Morisaki had already used his own senses to aim the prepared magic. This was a high level technique for pistol-shaped CADs known as "Drawless". Since there was an assistance device built in that "activated in the direction that the CAD was pointed in", it was very difficult to fire pistol-shaped CADs without drawing them. Nonetheless, Morisaki did this perfectly without sacrificing the Specialized CAD's advantage in speed.

In truth, Kasumi didn't rate Morisaki really highly in her book. Both the scale of Magic Sequences and strength of interference were only average, it was his deployment speed that was faster, and only that alone. She once harbored the doubt as to why someone like him who clearly only possessed this degree of talent was selected into the Public Moral Committee, but at this moment, Kasumi could only frankly admit that she didn't have a good eye for people.

Even now, her belief that Morisaki only had average Magic Power remained unchanged. Unrelated to the Magic Power that one was born with, this level of technique should come naturally to an upperclassman, Kasumi thought.

(I too need to work even harder.)

Internally buoyed with motivation, Kasumi clenched her fists,

"Kasumi."

But when a flat voice called out her name from behind her, Kasumi's body immediately tightened as if she jumped.

"Kitayama-senpai……"

Directly before her abashed self, Shizuku stared at Kasumi with a dark expression on her face.

After being brought back to the Public Moral Committee headquarters by Morisaki and Shizuku, Kasumi and Takuma felt like they were sitting on pins and needles. Members of the Public Moral Committee present included the chief, Kanon, as well as Morisaki and Shizuku, who had brought them here (Shizuku was not on duty today, but was coincidentally dragged into this). The Club Activities Group were represented by the head, Hattori, and the executive officer, Tomitsuka, as well as the representative from the Student Council, Tatsuya, here for some unknown reason.

"Kasumi, as a member of the Public Moral Committee, what the hell were you doing? And you were even on patrol……"

Kanon deeply sighed whereas Kasumi averted her gaze in shame.

"Shippou, you are aware that unauthorized use of magic is against school rules, correct? Using magic after getting into a fight is already a serious enough infraction, then you went ahead and attacked the Public Moral Committee member trying to defuse the situation……"

Tomitsuka's sigh passed into the ears of Takuma as he sat there tightly with his eyes gazing straight ahead.

"At any rate, I feel that there is a need to get the whole story first."

After hearing Hattori's words, Kanon nodded unhappily.

"Seriously…… And here I thought we would be free of any hassle after club invitation week....."

Kanon rudely scratched her head while dipping it before raising her head to gaze sharply at Kasumi and Takuma.

"I will say this first. Kasumi's case was attempted, so expulsion is off the table, there is still the possibility of suspension. Although also an attempted case, Shippou's case belongs to the worst offenses for CAD related infractions and can result in expulsion."

Takuma received Kanon's declaration without moving a muscle. In order to prevent his body from trembling, he forced his body to stand.

"I want you both to keep that in mind as you speak. Now, what was the cause for all this?"

Kanon looked towards Kasumi's side first.

"Shippou-kun insulted the Saegusa Family."

Kanon turned her eyes towards Takuma.

"I received unforgivable slander from Saegusa."

Both Kasumi and Takuma refused to look at one another.

"Huh…… Hattori, how do you want to handle this incident?"

Upon hearing Kanon's words, Hattori opened his tightly closed eyes.

"Shippou belongs to the Club Activities Group. I do not have the confidence that I can make an unbiased decision."

"If you say that, isn't Kasumi a member of the Public Moral Committee?"

"Then let's have a third party that is not the Club Activities Group or the Public Moral Committee, the Student Council, make the decision."

With both Kanon and Hattori looking at him, Tatsuya inwardly sighed loudly. This was a sigh that everything was happening exactly how he had foreseen it. The fact of the matter was that he was only here as the representative of the Student Council because Azusa fled after getting a premonition that something troublesome was on the horizon. Isori also secured his own avenue of retreat by giving off a smile that said "the representative of the Student Council should be the Student Council Vice President". While there was one other Student Council Vice President, Tatsuya was unwilling to push this task onto his sister, so he could come here with the determination to do his duty. In short, he had mentally composed himself to handle this irksome business the moment he had stepped into the room.

"I think it would be better if they were allowed to fight it out."

Hattori's brows moved slightly.

"Eh, then, we're letting the two of them go?"

Kanon asked back in shock, but Hattori said nothing. Tatsuya had an inkling to what his thoughts on the matter were, but that was not something to be verbalized.

"Since there's no way to discuss an appropriate solution, then strength will decide this. I heard from the previous Chief of the Public Moral Committee that this was the school's recommendation."

Tomitsuka displayed astonishment at Tatsuya's declaration, but Kanon and Hattori both wore looks that said all this was natural. Speaking of which, Shizuku was looking off to the side with a sleepy expression, an expression that wished that all of this would end quickly.

"While unauthorized use of magic is a major infraction, there is no need to penalize students who only attempted it. Isn't this a common occurrence among new students?"

This time, it was Morisaki's turn to avert his eyes with a bitter expression on his face, but fortunately no one followed up with any barbs.

"I think that since both sides have put their honor on the line, using strength to determine the outcome would leave no cause for complaint."

"I think that the Vice President's idea is sound, Hattori?"

After listening to Tatsuya's opinion, Kanon immediately asked Hattori without thinking about it.

"I have no objection. Shiba, we will rely on you for the procedural forms."

"Understood."

Tatsuya nodded at Hattori's words and walked towards the direct staircase in order to obtain Azusa's confirmation letter.

"Shiba-senpai."

Behind him, Takuma spoke up.

"Shippou, anything you're unsatisfied with?"

Tomitsuka was the one who issued the reprimand.

"No! But if I'm going to have a match with Saegusa, I have a request."

Takuma was in no position to dictate terms, a fact he was well aware of himself.

"Go ahead."

Thus Kanon urged him to speak on quickly.

"I wish for my opponent to not be Saegusa Kasumi, but Saegusa Kasumi and Saegusa Izumi both at the same time."

"Shippou, are you looking down on me?"

Setting aside whether or not she was using the correct courtesy while surrounded by upperclassmen, Kasumi's inquiry was a legitimate one.

"Reason being?"

Still, when she heard Tatsuya's question for Takuma, Kasumi temporarily shut her mouth and listened carefully.

"This is a match that puts pride on the line for the Shippou and Saegusa Families. Furthermore, isn't it public knowledge that 'the Saegusa twins can only reveal their true strength when both are gathered together'?"

"So a victory achieved without both of them being present is not a true victory?"

"Exactly."

Tatsuya momentarily stopped speaking before turning towards Kasumi.

"That is Shippou-kun's position. Do you have any objections if that is the case, Kasumi?"

"Nothing at all. I will make him regret this dearly."

"Then, so shall it be."

With that, Tatsuya walked towards the staircase leading to the Student Council Room.

After returning with the permission slip carrying the seal of the Student Council President, Tatsuya was followed by Izumi and, for some unknown reason, Miyuki and Honoka.

"Chief, please press your seal here."

"Eh, the seal? ……Where did I put that?"

Behind the panicky Kanon, Shizuku pulled out a small box carrying important items from the book cabinet. Clearly hiding her abashment behind a mask of courtesy, Kanon received the small box and pressed the seal on the permission slip.

As if to dispel the awkward atmosphere, Hattori coughed loudly.

"Where should we select as the grounds?"

"Please conduct this in Practice Room #2."

Honoka was the one who answered the question Hattori directed at Tatsuya. Everyone here knew that she had come here with the passkey for Practice Room #2 without any verbal confirmation.

"Is Shiba-san the referee?"

This question came from Tomitsuka. It seemed that from the very beginning, he was highly curious as to why Miyuki was here for all this.

"No, I'm just the witness."

Miyuki smiled as she denied Tomitsuka's hypothesis.

"Then, the judge will be Tatsuya-kun?"

Shizuku's question was phrased towards Tatsuya himself, but Kanon interrupted before Tatsuya could reply.

"That's fine."

"I have no objection."

Hattori followed on the heels of Kanon's words. Neither of them appeared interested in Tatsuya's opinion on the matter.

"—Let's go. We don't have much time until the school closes."

The one who proposed this match was Tatsuya, so there was no way they would allow him to say "No". Tatsuya could only resist the urge to sigh as he urged everyone to move.

The ones who relocated to Practice Room #2 included the participants of this duel that was framed as a match, Takuma, Kasumi, and Izumi. Also present was Tatsuya in the capacity as the referee, Miyuki as the witness, and Honoka as the holder of the keys (passkeys). Rounding out the 8 people were Tomitsuka from the Club Activities Group and Shizuku from the Public Moral Committee. –Morisaki should have been here as a witness considering the duty shift of the Public Moral Committee, but Shizuku volunteered to be his replacement.

Faced with these witnesses, Takuma felt somewhat confused. Based on his knowledge, Tatsuya and Miyuki were in the Saegusa camp. With both the referee and witness on the enemy's side, forget a stacked battle, this was going to be an uphill battle the entire way.

On the other hand, both Honoka and Shizuku were talented individuals whom Takuma wished to call upon for assistance in order to regain the Shippou Family's rightful place. Takuma's simple line of logic told him that if he could impress the two of them with his might here, they would be easier to persuade later down the line. –Well, this was nothing to knock a 15 year old young man for, seeing as Takuma's mental age matched his real age. Broadly speaking, it was Tatsuya's group that didn't seem like youngsters befitting their age.

A completely unfavorable position, as well as the rewards involved if he could beat the odds and obtain victory.

Faced with both Saegusa sisters, Takuma's confusion only sharpened his fighting spirit.

On the other hand, Kasumi and Izumi weren't as invested as Takuma. Kasumi was just here because of Takuma's one-sided meddling, though that was probably a falsehood, whereas Izumi felt like she had been roped along for the ride. Neither of them bore any particular feelings for the Shippou Family. To them, it was just irritating to be viewed hostilely, and so long as he kept to himself, they cared not the slightest that he had higher grades or was selected as the student representative.

In essence, neither of them cared for worldly status or reputation. Though they liked to be praised and detested being looked down upon, they were not the type to plot for their gain. On some level, this could be described as those blessed by the heavens lack nothing, but this wasn't because they wished for it either.

The two of them were of one accord when it came to "drawing a period on this irritating business". For this, they needed to utterly crush him to the point that he would never dare to give provocation again. With this determination in mind, the two of them squared off against Takuma.

Practice Room #2 was even longer than the Practice Room #3 where Tatsuya faced off against Hattori one year ago. This was a classroom designed to use medium-range magic. The area extending one meter from the walls was colored in red.

Takuma stood in the blue area while Kasumi and Izumi stood in the yellow area.

Takuma was dressed in his usual school uniform and carried a pristinely bound book under his left armpit.

Kasumi and Izumi had changed into practice uniforms that maximized ease of movement, work clothes with long sleeves and pants made from heavy fabric. Typically, a sleeveless jacket with absorption properties would be worn on top of these clothes that would be worn during Outside Technical Exercises at the artificial forest behind the mountain, but right now neither of them wore this jacket. The skintight work clothes they wore perfectly displayed their delicate curves, but Tomitsuka appeared to be the only one present who had no idea where to look.

"The rules for this match forbid physical contact."

Tatsuya made this declaration as he stood at the dividing line between blue and yellow areas. Forbidding physical contact referred to the rule that bodily contact was forbidden during this match, a common occurrence for matches between those of different genders unless special circumstances were involved (typically, matches between women also adopted this rule).

"I believe both sides already know this, but I will go over the rules again right now. Both sides are not allowed to step outside their colored areas. Either stepping into your opponent's area or the red area would constitute defeat. You are forbidden from physically touching your opponent's body. This rule also extends to contact by weapons. However....."

As he said this, Tatsuya sneaked a peek at Takuma's face.

"Using long-range magic to manipulate weapons does not constitute an infraction."

However, Tatsuya swiftly turned his gaze to a more neutral position between the two sides.

"Finally, fatal strikes or attacks that cause irrecoverable damage to your opponent are strictly forbidden. If I judge the situation to be at risk, I will forcibly end the match."

For an instant, Takuma wore a derisive expression, which must be because he thought "bring it on if you can". Though Tatsuya, Miyuki, Honoka, and Shizuku all noticed this, no one scolded Takuma for his disrespectful attitude.

"Then, both sides, prepare yourselves."

Kasumi and Izumi shifted to the center of their area.

Takuma never moved from his position near the dividing line and let the book he held beneath his armpit flutter to the ground by his feet.

Tatsuya alternately switched his eyes between the three of their faces. As one, all three of them nodded.

Retreating to the wall, Tatsuya raised his right fist over his head before swinging it down forcefully.

With a flash of psions, they released their magic.

The ones launching magic attacks were Takuma and Kasumi, while Izumi was focused completely on defense with Zone Interference.

Alone as he was, Takuma was forced to attack and defend whereas Kasumi could focus entirely on offense.

The conditions clearly favored Kasumi.

"What do you think?"

Shizuku whispered to Honoka.

"They appear to be even now, I think….."

Honoka's whispered response was not filled with confidence.

Kasumi primarily relied on Move-Type Magic, setting Takuma himself as the target for the blocks of air sent flying towards him. This strategy aimed

at forcing her opponent out of bounds to win. For defense, Takuma relied on Data Fortification and physical obstacles.

On the other side, Takuma used Oscillation-Type Magic to directly counterattack, but once deterred by Izumi's Zone Interference, he switched strategies to firing compressed air bullets gathered in his hands. This was a popular magic known as "Air Bullet" and, given its popularity, its effectiveness was guaranteed. However, Izumi's Zone Interference was broader than he imagined and the Air Bullet immediately dissipated once entering her Zone Interference, making it very difficult to land an effective attack.

"I get the feeling that Kasumi-chan doesn't want to hurt Shippou-kun. That's why the scope of her attacks has been restricted."

"Indeed."

"Shippou-kun, on the other hand…… Doesn't look like he's completely grasped how to use Air Bullet."

"Wouldn't it be the same for Izumi?"

"Yeah. Without putting the entire room under her dominion like Miyuki does, using Zone Interference alone is insufficient to completely block Air Bullet. The two of them are so inherently talented that they have neglected to put in the necessary hard work to perfect their skills."

"They are new students after all."

"That's true. We were more or less just like them before the Nine Schools Competition."

Although he was unable to hear Honoka and Shizuku's conversation, Takuma was deeply conscious of the fact that "this can't continue like this". He frantically tried to settle his agitated heart and desperately searched for an opening while deploying his magic.

He didn't feel that his Magic Power was inferior to theirs. He wouldn't lose even 2-on-1 and he had the confidence that victory was his the moment he played his trump card. However, Takuma was aware that there was a high risk of injury to his opponents if he unleashed his trump card. Even though he was an upperclassman at First High, he didn't believe that Tatsuya, who wasn't a member of the 28 families, could stop his magic in time, but there

was still the chance of him losing because he broke the rules. This was the source of Takuma's hesitation.

However.

(Not good!)

He was trying to think while operating magic in a combat situation. As expected, this was not going to work.

He used "Dissipate" on the block of air aimed at his back. After exchanging blows thus far, Takuma had more or less grasped the differences between him and his opponents. Kasumi had the edge when it came to scale of magic, chaining spells, and versatility. Takuma was stronger than Kasumi when it came to interference strength, but he was at an impasse with Izumi in that regard.

Since his interference strength was stronger and the Magic Sequence itself was fairly simple, Takuma was able to activate "Dissipate" in a short period of time and nullify Kasumi's "Wind Hammer" at the last second. Regardless, air released from its compressed state buffeted Takuma's back like a strong wind. Wind Hammer's air compression was far lower than Air Bullet. While the released air was not sufficient to deal any damage to Takuma's flesh, it was still enough to cause his posture to buckle. Takuma's body tilted forward, causing the accuracy of his magic to drop.

The numerous variables behind Air Bullet included size of the bullet, degree of air compression, speed of the bullet as a fixed rate once incorporated into the Activation Sequence, direction of the shot, and farthest possible range, all subject to change depending on the amount dictated by the Magician. Although direction didn't require verification with the naked eye, line of sight was publicly acknowledged to be the easier approach to aiming.

This was why Takuma's Air Bullets began firing towards a lower angle. A lengthy distance away from Izumi's feet, one of the bullets along its trajectory was caught by the Zone Interference and released from its compressed state before impacting on the ground and rolling to Izumi's feet.

With a small shriek, Izumi's body was shaken by the wind. The unexpected wind surge caused her to lose her balance. Seeing this, Takuma immediately realized his error. It was only now that he realized that the Zone Interference nullified the compression of the air and continuously applied acceleration, but did absolutely nothing to remove the kinetic energy of the air.

The sphere of empty air that had been neutralized in mid-air expanded outwards in all directions. In short, the ones near the ground that were expanding met resistance from the ground which limited the expansion directions. The kinetic energy of the forward motion was incorporated into the air currents expanding downwards to turn into a surge of wind blowing towards his opponents.

(In other words, I just have to keep shooting in directions that will only nullify the magic and not the attack itself!)

Takuma formed 7 Air Bullets in the space in front of him. They were formed at the points of a hexagon with one of them in the center. The one in the center fired first, followed swiftly by the other 6 bullets with nary a lapse in time.

The Shippou's magic – magic devised by the 7th Research Lab was called Herd Control. Here, the term herd does not refer to a group of biological organisms, but instead referred to a group that was connected together without any rules. Multiple independent objects, or even phenomena, were manipulated together as if they were one body.

More than just causing several hundred ice pellets to land, this Herd Control could also be used on techniques aimed at one target. For the eldest son of the Shippou Family, causing 7 Air Bullets to fire together was a piece of cake.

The first bullet fell on Izumi's Zone Interference and detonated. However, the expanding air was immediately surrounded by the following 6 bullets and pressed forward again. In the end, the Air Bullets gradually lowered the density of the air until wind shrapnel rushed towards Izumi.

"Ah!?"

Izumi did not call out because she was struck by the wind shrapnel, but cried out after being suddenly pushed to one side. The speed that Kasumi lunged at Izumi was obviously the result of magic. She must have altered

the Move-Type Magic originally targeting Takuma to herself, ignoring the increased burden that the body brought on by the acceleration process of Move-Type Magic. This was the same even if it was her own magic, just as the side being pushed aside will also suffer the same harm. My chance has come, Takuma thought.

Takuma clapped his hands in front of his chest. Within his area, the nature of sound altered. The sound of Takuma's clapping was amplified in volume and the sound waves were gathered together before being released at Kasumi.

Even if the Zone Interference nullified the magic, the amplified volume would remain unchanged. Even if the gathered sound waves would spread somewhat, there should still be enough sound to rival a concussion grenade detonating at close range striking towards Kasumi. That should be more than enough to render her unconscious, or at least that was the plan.

Yet, Takuma's sound wave attack was severed by the vacuum fault Izumi erected.

Air had been sucked away by the vacuum fault. The rush of wind accompanying the cacophony made a mess of Kasumi and Izumi's hair. Kasumi's short locks were one thing, but Izumi's longer tresses were left in a chaotic state, yet all she did was lightly comb a hand through her hair and all was well.

"Kasumi-chan, are you OK?"

Raising her torso slightly, Izumi asked Kasumi, who was still pressing down on top of her.

"Thanks, Izumi. That was a close one just now."

Kasumi replied back as she shifted her body away from Izumi.

Right now, Takuma continued to launch his attacks. Exchanging defensive duties, Kasumi and Izumi were barely able to hold him off.

Nonetheless, neither of them betrayed any hint of unease on their faces.

"We appear to have underestimated this guy."

"I don't know about the term underestimate, but that appears to be the case."

"This will be bad if it continues on like this."

"However, you don't plan on losing, do you?"

"Of course. Izumi, we're going to use that."

"Yeah, Kasumi-chan. Just like usual."

"I will shoot."

"I will raise."

"Counting down."

"Three." "Two." "One."

"Roles assigned!"

Immediately after Kasumi shouted out, the force of the magic roaring towards Takuma spiked exponentially.

Takuma immediately raised his phenomena interference strength around his back, head, and flanks. Detecting the harbinger of a hitherto incomparably powerful magic, Takuma channeled all of his offense into defense.

He felt that the magic targeted air molecules while gathering and moving them – so this must be a magic that controlled the air currents, but he had no time to continue observing. Instinct told him to erect an all directional, sealed barrier and Takuma was able to finish his defensive barrier first only because the design of the Magic Sequence for this magic was far less complex than the magic Kasumi and Izumi were about to invoke.

In the narrow framework of the classroom, a furious tornado began brewing. By the time the wind pressed down on top of his head and his entire body, the wind was everywhere around his back and sides. He was almost blown away along with the sealed barrier around him. With a barrier around him, the surface area impacted by the wind grew just as the pressure sustained would increase as well. Even with that being said, he couldn't decrease the permeability or lower the size of the barrier. As a Magician, Takuma noticed that the level of nitrogen within the wind buffeting him had increased.

This was a magic that raised the level of nitrogen in the air as well as magic that moved blocks of air around. A combination of Gather-Type and Move-Type Magic, "Nitrogen Storm". A single breath of this air that was heavily deficient in oxygen would immediately render someone unconscious due to lack of oxygen. If he lowered the barrier to prevent being blown away by the turbulence, then he would immediately start running short of oxygen.

Beneath Takuma's feet where he furiously stamped to right himself, the sound of the pristinely bound book's pages being blown furiously by the wind could be heard as the pages continuously flapped in the wind. The book itself had not been blown away because the wind from the magic only blew at a height above the knees. The pristinely bound book that Takuma carried was a particularly heavy tome. Takuma looked at the back of the book that was printed with the same geometric symbols from the first page to the last and decided to use his trump card.

"This is…… Nitrogen Storm?"

"Correct."

In the face of Miyuki's both shocked and amazed question, Tatsuya gave a concise confirmation.

"To be able to fluently wield such a high level magic, I guess I should say as expected of Saegusa-senpai's younger sisters."

"Still a little rough around the edges, but impressive nonetheless."

On the level of neutralizing an opponent by using magic to induce a lack of oxygen, this magic probably belonged to the same category as Mayumi's anti-personnel trump card "Dry Meteor". Kasumi and Izumi probably devised this trump card due to Mayumi's influence. Still, in terms of magic difficulty, Nitrogen Storm was far more difficult than Dry Meteor. Though it was a hassle to gather a large amount of dry ice particles laced with carbon dioxide in the air beforehand, Nitrogen Storm required constant maintenance of the molecular composition in the air as well as careful control of the air currents, rendering this an extremely difficult magic.

Kasumi and Izumi's control of the air currents for Nitrogen Storm was far too coarse, which was why Tatsuya said "still a little rough around the

edges", but this was definitely a high level magic that could not be seen at the high school level.

"So this is multiplicative magic…… No wonder people say that 'the Saegusa twins can only reveal their true strength when both are gathered together'."

Strictly speaking, until this point Kasumi and Izumi had been using fundamental magic and only resorted to high level magic when pressed into a tight spot. As the one responsible for attacking, Kasumi didn't use this spell not because she was unwilling or she was going easy on her opponent, but because Nitrogen Storm was too difficult for Kasumi to use by herself.

Saegusa Kasumi and Saegusa Izumi bore the name "Saegusa twins" because of the special connotation behind that name as well as the unique characteristic that only the two of them had. It is only through their complete cooperation that they are able to use high powered, and highly difficult, magic that either one of them would not be able to on their own.

People who were not Magicians would think nothing of this, but this was an atypical phenomenon for Magicians. There existed large scale, high level magical techniques that relied on multiple Magicians casting the same spell. This was especially the case in Ancient Magic, though actual examples were quite few, but certainly not rare when it came to techniques passed down from generation to generation. However, this sort of magic ritual required chanting, worship, dance or similar mediums that used all 5 senses.

When multiple Magicians use the same magic at the same time, Magic Power was not additive. In this situation, only the spell of the Magician with the greatest Magic Power would activate, while the Magic Power from other Magicians would actually interfere with phenomena alteration. Magical rituals conducted by multiple individuals required consensus among Magicians to not overlap their Magic Sequences in order to cast more complex or even gigantic Magic Sequences. Its major selling point or defining characteristic was allotting specific goals to each individual Magician, or even a task to be repeated over and over.

Yet Kasumi and Izumi were able to increase their Magic Power simply by using normal magic through usual assistance from their CADs. In addition,

the two of them were not components of a Magic Sequence, but combined to form a single, greater Magic Power.

Kasumi loved to hurtle Magic Sequences at the target and Izumi gave it interference strength. Their Magic Power was multiplied rather than added together when casting magic. To be able to accomplish this, not only did their bodies have to contain the same hereditary genes, their mentality and unique magic calculation area had to be the same. Takuma might have determined that Kasumi was stronger in invocation speed and scale of design for Magic Sequences while Izumi was stronger in interference strength, that was actually a misunderstanding. The reason he was led to believe so was because that's how Kasumi and Izumi wielded their magic, so the result would be the same even if they swapped roles.

This was purely a coincidence that could not even be replicated through genetic medication. This was the secret behind the power of the "Saegusa twins".

Holding his breath and standing firm, Takuma fell to one knee and closed the book that was about to be blown to tatters by the wind. Immediately, Takuma once more opened the cover of the pristinely bound book. In that instant, every page within the book took to the skies like snowflakes fluttering in the wind.

The book Takuma brought contained 720 pages of foldable B5 paper. The book was 182mm wide and 256mm long (standard B5 paper was 182mm by 257mm). Excluding the 2mm on each page covered by the book covers (where the book was bound), the rest of the page was cut into little squares that were 4mm by 4mm. At that size, every two pages (one sheet) contained 2880 pieces. At 720 pages or 360 sheets, there was a total of 1,036,800 pieces of paper.

More than a million small paper squares flew along the turbulence like snowflakes towards the twins. Needless to say, those 4mm by 4mm squares weren't just simple pieces of paper. Anyone who could capture those countless pieces of paper in their eyes could tell that those pieces of paper were not bending in the wind, like numerous thin, square-shaped blades with the hardiness of glass. At first glance, the million odd blades were dancing along without any organization whatsoever, but they were truly gathering around Kasumi and Izumi.

Kasumi and Izumi, as well as Tatsuya and Miyuki, knew very well that all of these paper snowflakes were being manipulated by a man. They who knew the Shippou Family's magic naturally knew what this magic was.

One of the trump cards of the Shippou Family, "Million Edge". A magic that used Herd Control to manipulate over a million pieces of paper that turned into sharp blades to eviscerate the foe.

The twins continued to control Nitrogen Storm as they employed another magic. By slamming blocks of air with large amounts of oxygen into the paper snowflakes, they were using adiabatic compression to create heated wind that surpassed paper's burning point to ignite the paper blades.

This was an alternate form of "Heat Storm". This was a type of magic that was another level higher than simply creating adiabatic compressed air blocks. They had activated this magic while Nitrogen Storm was ongoing, but this was still within the boundaries of their abilities right now. The main subject of the 3rd Research Lab was the control of multiple magics at the same time. The 3rd Research Lab originally intended to test the boundary of how many magics could be activated at the same time as well as raising that boundary as part of their Magician Augmentation Project. Among the Magician Development Labs, the 3rd Research Lab was a rarity in that they were open with their findings, allowing the 10th Research Lab to also benefit from this finding. For the Juumonji Family that had mastered Phalanx, this helped them incorporate more magic and resulted in the ability to use multiple magics. As for the Saegusa Family Magicians who moved to the 7th Research Lab, even if it was high level magic, using two or three of them at the same time was no difficult task.

The tornado that disallowed any breathing devoured Takuma as the air that was heated above 500 degrees Celsius was about to burn the paper squares into a crisp.

Bathed in the heat that surpassed their burning point, the million odd blades under Takuma's will were protected by magic as they thirsted for Kasumi and Izumi's blood.

At this rate, Takuma would keel over due to oxygen deprivation and Kasumi and Izumi would be slashed to pieces by the countless blades that had not been burned up. It was readily apparent that the conclusion would leave both sides with permanent injuries.

"That's far enough!"

Tatsuya moved his right arm.

In his outstretched hand, a silver CAD flashed brilliantly. That was the pistol-shaped Specialized CAD, Silver Horn.

Nitrogen Storm.

Million Edge.

Heat Storm.

Their Magic Sequences were torn to shreds and a surge of psions scattered those broken remnants.

As for Tatsuya's voice declaring a halt to the match, who knew if that traveled to the consciousness of those three in battle?

In the midst of the silence brought on by the disappearance of magic, regardless of whether it was Takuma, Kasumi, Izumi, no one could understand what had happened as they stood there in a daze. As for whether everyone present was clueless as to what happened – that was not the case. In a word, the only ones who stood there dumbly were the three participants of this match, the three Year 1 students.

While Tomitsuka's eyes had widened, he wasn't wearing an expression of someone who had suffered a severe shock. Though there was some element of astonishment, it would be more appropriate to say that was an expression of awe after realizing what had occurred. As for the other three, Miyuki, Honoka, and Shizuku all wore expressions that said "just as we expected from Tatsuya".

In reality, only Miyuki alone truly understood what had just happened here. Still, the three Year 1 students could not even comprehend the fact that "Tatsuya's Counter Magic had just nullified the magics coming from Takuma, Kasumi, and Izumi in an instant".

"This match has resulted in both sides forfeiting the right to continue."

As the referee, Tatsuya pronounced his judgment. At this time, the Year 1 students finally recovered from their frozen status.

"What the heck is going on!?"

The first one to question Tatsuya was Kasumi.

"I should have said this at the beginning of the match. Fatal strikes or attacks that cause irrecoverable damage to your opponent are strictly forbidden. If I judge the situation to be at risk, I will forcibly end the match."

"Then, the result of the match is?"

Izumi was far more composed than her twin sibling, but her tone was harsher than usual as she asked her question.

"Both sides have lost the right to continue, ergo both sides have lost."

This was not a draw, but a mutual defeat. Tatsuya intentionally said it this way to imply "there will not be another match", but whether Izumi and company were able to understand the nuances remained unknown.

"But, Shiba-senpai, I believe that Nitrogen Storm is different than Million Edge in that this is neither a fatal magic nor would it leave a lingering repercussion."

Izumi meant that "Wasn't Shippou-kun the one who lost because he broke the rules?", a detail that Takuma immediately picked up on. Takuma was about to reply immediately, but Tatsuya beat him to the punch.

"Indeed, if the power is carefully controlled, then Nitrogen Storm will not leave any serious repercussions on your opponent. However, Izumi, you two did not have that fine level of control."

With Tatsuya visually interrogating with a "Is that not so?" look, neither of the twins spoke up.

"That is not the case!"

In place of the twins, which was not entirely the case, it was Takuma's turn to contest Tatsuya's decision.

"We would have determined the outcome prior to that happening!"

A spark – not out of delight, but out of interest – flashed in Tatsuya's eyes.

"Then you are saying that you believe you won?"

"Indeed."

Fearless in the face of Tatsuya's cold gaze, Takuma arrogantly continued onward.

"The Saegusas' Heat Storm failed to stop Million Edge. Before the Nitrogen Storm could have breached my sealed barrier, I would have been able to attack the Saegusas!"

A trace of satire slipped into Tatsuya's chilly gaze.

"Which is to say that had I not interfered, hundreds upon thousands of paper strips filled with burning heat would have shredded the delicate flesh of a pair of Year 1 female students. Is that the gist of what you are trying to say?"

Around them, there were at least two people who were trying to fight down their laughter.

Takuma flushed. The redness of his face was so apparent that anyone could see it.

"In that case, Shippou, this match ends in your defeat due to rules infraction."

Before the excited Takuma could explode, Tatsuya made this declaration in a voice so cold that it was almost cruel. This was Takuma's defeat. Before a steely voice that was cold as ice, even Takuma himself hesitated as to how he should argue this.

"I will not allow you to say that you are ignorant of what happens to those who take a hit from Million Edge dead on."

Takuma was about to open his mouth and say something, but Tatsuya never intended to give him a chance to defend himself.

"Allowing an attack that is completely overkill is synonymous to allowing a mutual slaughter. Under the rules of this match, that is not allowed."

"Then!"

Takuma appeared to be trying to free himself from the tremendous pressure being exerted on him by Tatsuya and fired back with more fervor than was necessary. Just squeezing out such a simple word plainly cost him a lot of energy.

"So you are saying that from the very beginning, once I used Million Edge I would lose!?"

"If you are unable to control its power, then that is the same as breaking the rules."

"How can that be, that's ridiculous!"

Tatsuya remained calm and collected while facing the enraged Takuma, an attitude that only served to fan the flames of Takuma's fury. Seeing his agitated state, not only was his senior at the Club Activities Group, Tomitsuka, worried about him, even Takuma's opponent up until this point, Kasumi, also shared that concern.

"That's practically denying me my trump card even before the match has started! Isn't that an extremely unfair match!?"

"Everyone's conditions were the same. For the Saegusa siblings, high powered magic was also forbidden."

Still, they were the only two who cared to debate the results. The Year 2 female students – Miyuki, Shizuku, and Honoka all watched Takuma with compassionate eyes.

"Bullshit! They don't have magic that is powerful enough to be banned!"

"Nitrogen Storm carries more than enough firepower. I didn't stop them in the beginning because they had controlled its power to within acceptable parameters."

Takuma was struck speechless after Tatsuya spoke in a voice that couldn't even be called unpleasant by the widest of margins. Not only did he feel this from the cold gaze leveled at him from Tatsuya, Takuma felt that even the female upperclassmen were laughing at him. He frantically wracked his brain for a counterargument.

"However, Shippou, you were unable to finely control the strength of Million Edge."

"That's bullshit, I had perfect control of the spell!"

Takuma's response was completely groundless and was only his reflex willfully using his emotions to make his decision. All of the Year 2 students present knew very well that Takuma could not completely control Million Edge.

If Tatsuya were to not only declare his own decision but also ask Miyuki, Shizuku, Honoka, and Tomitsuka to all voice their opinions, Takuma would have no choice but to concede. Setting aside Tatsuya's people for the moment, if even Tomitsuka supported Tatsuya's decision, then undoubtedly Takuma would have a hard time stubbornly sticking to his guns.

"I am the referee of this match, and I will determine victory or defeat. I should have said this in the beginning."

Yet, Tatsuya failed to do so. Victory or defeat was determined by the referee. Tatsuya felt that there was no need to change that rule.

"—Ah, I get it! So you're saying that the use of Million Edge constitutes overkill! Then you should have said so in the very beginning! If I knew that Million Edge was against the rules, I would have chosen another strategy!"

Takuma was ignorant of the fact that he was throwing a tantrum like a little child.

The gaze Tomitsuka leveled at Takuma changed from concerned to uneasy.

The look Miyuki directed towards Takuma switched from compassionate to piercing.

Nevertheless, Tatsuya continued to use cold logic to deal with Takuma's ruckus.

"Stop sulking, Shippou. You were unable to control its power because you're still immature. Regardless of whether it was forbidden, the inability to fulfill the requirements proves that you are still lacking."

"You're a Weed. You have no right to say that!"

The classroom suddenly…… fell silent. That silence was suffused with an almost painful anxiety.

Takuma's originally flushed face now went deathly pale. He had never planned to go so far. It was almost as if all of his blood had rushed to his head, thus leading him to say something he could never take back.

Shizuku and Honoka had turned pale for another reason altogether. That was because they were fearful of the winter storm that was about to ravage

this entire room. Fortunately, prior to that occurrence, Tatsuya opened his mouth.

"Are you displeased with what I said?"

Takuma also noticed that his statement was inappropriate on two fronts. "Weed" was a term that was taboo on campus. Furthermore, Tatsuya was an "exception" who had been promoted to Magic Engineering from Course 2 due to outstanding talent. Takuma thought furiously in order to recover from that blunder, but he had already been pressed into a corner and unable to restore his cool, so no solution came to his mind. Even so, Takuma still didn't shut his mouth.

"Hmph…… I'm displeased only because of the unfair adjudication! The Saegusas were able to control Nitrogen Storm and I was unable to control Million Edge. Isn't that too much of a bias impression on Shiba-senpai's part? I controlled Million Edge perfectly! Shiba-senpai is clearly favoring the Saegusa!"

"Shippou…… Your words are at odds with one another."

Takuma allowed his emotions free reign as he allowed his mouth to run wild like a child throwing a tantrum. The stunned voice that reprimanded the present Takuma came not from Tatsuya, but from Tomitsuka.

"If that situation had continued, your magic would have dealt damage to the Saegusa siblings that surpassed the bounds of this match. Didn't you already admit that?"

"That's because the Saegusas used Heat Storm!"

Takuma's words were not entirely illogical. Unfortunately, in this circumstance, these words only sounded like he was shedding responsibility.

"Enough, Shippou."

An emotionless voice inserted itself into Shippou and Tomitsuka's conversation.

Those words were issued from Kasumi's lips.

"To be unwilling to admit defeat to this degree, let's just call it your win."

"Kasumi-chan, is that really OK?"

Among those present that felt varying degrees of surprise, the one who asked Kasumi this was the one who knew her the best, Izumi.

"Yeah~, now that I think about it, we shouldn't get so heated about something like this. No matter how you look at it, using multiplicative magic in an unofficial school match along with a combination of Nitrogen Storm and Heat Storm is just plain overkill. Shiba-senpai is right about that."

Just like her words, Kasumi appeared to have completely calmed down.

Not only did the look they sent Takuma not contain a trace of enmity, it was absolutely carefree.

"……If that's what Kasumi-chan wants."

Izumi easily accepted Kasumi's words. Originally, she was only here to help out her older twin sister. Since Kasumi said that was fine, then Izumi wasn't going to be a stickler for the result.

Takuma looked like he was unable to decide whether to speak or not. Although he wanted to angrily shout "Don't be ridiculous!", he also felt that was too shameful. In the end, no shout came from him. As he fell silent thanks to this unexpected shock, he was able to reclaim a level of rationality.

Kasumi walked towards Tatsuya with Izumi following behind her.

"Shiba-senpai, I'm sorry for troubling you."

Kasumi and Izumi both bowed to Tatsuya. The fact that 70% of Izumi's attention was placed on Miyuki could probably be chalked up as her adorable part.

—While Takuma gritted his teeth and watched this scene.

"Still, can I say something?"

Of course, just apologizing at the end of it all was not Kasumi's style. Nay, it was more like not facing off against Tatsuya here was not Kasumi's style.

"What is it?"

Unlike the expression he wore while conversing with Takuma, Tatsuya wore a wry smile here.

"I – we never lost control of our magic. Forcibly stopping the match there was the wrong call on senpai's part."

After spilling all of those words with a resolute look in her eye, Kasumi left the practice room without waiting for Tatsuya's reply.

"Um, well."

Switching back and forth between Kasumi's back and Tatsuya's face, Izumi was truly (and quite rarely) bewildered.

"Izumi."

"Eh!"

Though this was plainly not completely unexpected, Izumi still jumped and went ramrod straight when Tatsuya called her name. Immediately afterward, Izumi lowered her head in shame at being tongue-tied.

Tatsuya never teased Izumi or put on a solemn expression. Instead, he continued speaking with a gentle expression.

"Please send a message to Kasumi for me. If she is unsatisfied, I am always willing to be the opponent for the two of you. That's all."

Was this because she was astounded? Izumi's eyes widened. Still, Izumi immediately understood that Tatsuya was saying this because he was taking Kasumi's feelings into account. This departed greatly from her previous impression of Tatsuya.

"……I understand, senpai. Thank you."

Izumi replied to Tatsuya as she bowed deeply to Tatsuya without going too far or too shallow. When Izumi raised her head, she remained where she was for some reason.

"What is it?"

Tatsuya asked this question to Izumi. For the first time, Izumi gave Tatsuya a smile that came from the bottom of her heart.

"I think I've changed my mind a little about senpai. You do have areas that make you seem like Miyuki Onee-sama's older brother."

This went far beyond retort worthy and the might of this line rivaled that of a train wreck. In spite of this, probably because this was far too honest to wield a forked tongue against, Tatsuya said nothing as he watched Izumi leave with an "Excuse me" and another short bow.

After Kasumi and Izumi left the practice room, Takuma continued to stand there without a word. In the eyes of the Year 2 students, he had been abandoned, but Takuma himself didn't think that way.

"Shiba-senpai."

At least from his perspective, he had hoped to speak to Tatsuya without anyone else present, which was why he stayed behind.

"Is there anything else you want to say?"

Tatsuya voice remained chilly, but no one called him "immature". Anyone who heard of the conversation that had occurred in this room would definitely lay the blame at Takuma's feet. In truth, Takuma also thought this way after recovering his rationality. Yet, at the same time, he decided against apologizing because he felt that it was far too late to do that. Excluding his behavioral blunder, he was determined to reclaim his lost face.

"I still haven't accepted this!"

"Still haven't accepted what?"

"That I lost because I broke the rules."

"Shippou!"

Unable to hold it in any longer, Tomitsuka thundered at Takuma. However, Takuma kept his eyes locked on Tatsuya and never spared Tomitsuka a glance.

"What is your wish?"

Tatsuya was in position to seriously deny Takuma's objection. In the first place, this match was designed to protect Kasumi and Takuma from the serious breach in school rules they had incurred. Protection was especially

the case for Takuma, seeing as he committed the greater infraction that ran the risk of expulsion. Even if this was favoritism or a mummer's farce, Takuma was in no position to make demands.

Even so, Tatsuya still inquired as to the source of Takuma's dissatisfaction. Rather than calling Tatsuya a gentle soul, it would be more appropriate to say that he was the type who didn't want to procrastinate when dealing with troublesome issues.

"Please allow me to prove it!"

"Prove what?"

"Prove that I can control Million Edge perfectly."

"And how would you do that?"

"Please duel me. I will use Million Edge and force senpai to surrender without harming you!"

Takuma's words caused Miyuki to lift a delicate eyebrow.

Nevertheless, white darkness failed to suffocate the classroom.

Before her emotions could explode, there came the sounds of a furious impact and a human body hitting the floor. This unexpected turnout put a hold on Miyuki's anger.

The one who fell to the floor was Takuma.

The one who struck him down was Tomitsuka.

"……Tomitsuka-senpai?"

Towards a completely bewildered Takuma who was propping himself up with his hands,

"Shippou, don't press your luck!"

Tomitsuka roared in absolute fury. Maybe Tomisuka's face was originally unpleasant to look at, though not to the degree that he should be described as having the face of an enraged ghoul, this time he was truly livid.

"From the very start you've been spouting these arrogant and disingenuous words…… Who the hell do you think you are? Huh? Or are you saying that the 28 families are allowed to behave like that?"

"I…… I didn't mean that."

Takuma remained sitting on the ground as he seemed to mutter to himself. He maintained his posture of only sitting up with his upper body undoubtedly because this incredible shock had robbed him of any thought towards standing up.

Takuma truly never noticed. He never really noticed at all. Fixated on a place within the Ten Master Clans, he always looked upwards and never downwards. No, even if he did lower his head he never truly looked.

Just as Takuma never acknowledged the value of the Shippou Family absent its place among the Ten Master Clans, so too did he unwittingly look down upon the Magicians who didn't even have the right to join the Ten Master Clans just as he derisively viewed his own father.

"Shippou. If you say you want to prove yourself, then I will be your opponent! Or are you saying that I'm not good enough for you? That 'Range Zero', the Tomitsuka trash of the Hundred Families, doesn't have what it takes to be your opponent!?"

Maybe because he was completely overcome by Tomitsuka's imposing manner, but Takuma kept crawling backwards on the ground. Was Tomitsuka about to press the attack home, or was Takuma about to demonstrate "how to flee with your tail between your legs"? Regardless of which one it was, the atmosphere in the practice room was filled eminent violence.

"Tomitsuka-kun, please relax."

Just as the situation became touch and go, Miyuki's clear voice caused the atmosphere to calm down.

"Without approval from the Student Council President and the Public Moral Committee Chief, no duels are to be permitted. In addition, doesn't Shippou-kun also need time to consider? And surely time to prepare the medium required to activate Million Edge, correct?"

"……That's true. My apologies."

Owing to Miyuki's reprimand, Tomitsuka was slightly ashamed of his temporarily inflamed passions.

"Shippou-kun, can you stand?"

In place of Tomitsuka, who had retreated to a corner, Honoka walked in front of Takuma. Though she was still upset with Takuma's rude display towards Tatsuya, she wasn't going to abandon an underclassman on the ground because of that. Based on that point alone, one could tell that Honoka was far too kind.

"I'm fine!"

Takuma swiftly scrambled to his feet. His face was red because a girl he was trying to draw to his camp had seen him discomfited – that was how Takuma chose to view this.

"Shippou, I have no inclination to play along with you. Tomitsuka, if you want to have a match with Shippou, it would be best if you spoke with Hattori first."

"Eh? Ah, you're right."

Tomitsuka's response started strong but faded down the stretch. Takuma stared in sullen silence at Tatsuya.

"Honoka, I'm sorry, could I bother you to lock the door?"

"Of course, Tatsuya-san."

Tatsuya was surrounded by an aura of "don't trouble me any further" as he swiftly departed.

With only Miyuki in tow.

Unfortunately, Tatsuya wasn't able to escape so easily.

It was approximately 15 minutes since Honoka locked the doors and returned to the Student Council Room. Just as Tatsuya got to his feet and was about to head for home, the doorbell to the Student Council Room rang.

"I'll get it. Please come in."

"Excuse me."

After Azusa used the remote to disengage the lock, the one who came through the door was the Head of the Club Activities Group, Hattori.

Rather than saying he had a bad feeling, it was more appropriate to say that Tatsuya was sure something terrible was about to happen as he straightened in his chair.

Highly displeased, or maybe with a bitter scowl, Hattori walked towards Azusa.

Sitting at the desk, there was no hint of trepidation from Azusa's part, a detail that surprised Tatsuya quite a bit.

"Nakajou, this is very difficult for me to say, or maybe I should say this is ridiculous……"

"Hattori-kun, what is the matter?"

In Azusa's shoes, that was all she could say.

"I'm sorry, I need to request another permission slip for a match."

"Again!? Who is it this time?"

Under these circumstances, the fact that Hattori said nothing defamatory about anyone was a testament to his character.

At the very least, he had a better sense of duty than Tatsuya, who had already foreseen this possibility and had chosen to protect himself by not reporting anything.

"It's Tomitsuka and Shippou."

"Shippou-kun again……?"

The deep creases in between Hattori's brows indicated that he was of the same sentiment as Azusa.

"……I felt that there were a few problems with his attitude when he refused to join the Student Council. This time is the same, and to be honest, I think that he needs a serious beating to help him reflect."

Miyuki and Honoka both nodded at this, but Hattori didn't see them.

"Still, it's a shame about his talent. I feel that if he was just a little more humble, he could be capable of great things."

Again, Hattori missed the visual conversation between Miyuki and Honoka that went something like this "What do you think?" "Unlikely".

"I think that in order to take him down a notch, making him suffer a little would be far more effective than chewing him out."

"So that's the reason behind this match…… Will Tomitsuka-kun be OK as the opponent? If it's for that sort of reason, wouldn't Sawaki-kun or even you yourself, Hattori-kun, be a little better?"

With Katsuto, Mayumi, and Mari graduating, the strongest students on the surface at First High turned into Hattori and Sawaki. ("Turned into" was just how the students phrased it, as there was no elimination tournament to determine this.)

"I considered teaching him a lesson myself, but Tomitsuka strongly requested for him to do it. Thus far, Tomitsuka has been responsible for training Shippou and he is definitely more than capable of doing this. Thus, this time I want to hand it over to him."

"Is this really going to be OK?"

Isori had been sitting quietly by listening to Hattori up until now and lent his support.

"Tomitsuka-kun is very strong. Just as Hattori-kun said, he is definitely more than capable."

Owing to the respective specialties of the two families, there was a substantial relationship between the Tomitsuka and Isori Families. Though their private relationship wasn't close, there was nothing strange about Isori Kei knowing the limits of Tomitsuka Hagane's might.

"Furthermore, Tomitsuka-kun has an earnest personality. Even under those circumstances, his personality didn't become twisted. I think that it is unlikely that there would be an unwelcome result if we allowed him to have a match with Shippou-kun."

Azusa knew about this, which was why she easily accepted Isori's suggestion.

"What day do you want to request? The school is about to close today so that's out of the question."

In response to Azusa's question, Hattori had prepared an answer ahead of time.

"Two days from now."

"Is it OK if it's not tomorrow?"

"That's because I don't want him to use continuous battles as an excuse. Leaving a day to prepare in between would be better."

"Two days from now would be Saturday. I'm not sure the practice rooms will still be open after school……"

Azusa said this as she opened up the screen regarding facilities requests.

"Ah, there's an opening at 3pm in Practice Room #3. Would one hour be enough?"

"Can you keep two hours open?"

"Hm~, no problem."

Although she was a little surprised at Hattori's request, Azusa still did as he requested and completed the scheduling request.

"Then, I will grant the permission slip ahead of time."

"Sorry for bothering you."

Hattori nodded to Azusa in thanks. Azusa snickered happily.

"……What's so funny?"

"I feel that Hattori-kun is becoming more like Juumonji-senpai."

To Azusa, this was undoubtedly praise. However, Hattori personally felt that he and Katsuto were two entirely different types of people. From his perspective, this was like saying he was imitating Katsuto to help bridge the gap between the two of them, something that definitely put him in an odd mood.

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At the entrance to the living room, Miyuki was watching her brother sitting on the sofa after he had changed into casual clothes with worried eyes.

On the way home from school, Tatsuya seemed to be thinking about something. Still, this was just Miyuki's personal feelings on the matter as Tatsuya's attitude was no different than usual. He would respond any time he was asked. Not only would he respond when prompted, he also asked Minami for her thoughts on school life as well as whether today's events were circulating among the Year 1 students.

However, despite everything appearing to be normal, Tatsuya was unquestionably troubled by something, Miyuki sincerely believed that. This was not whether she had observation skills, but the idea that her brother was troubled by something was passed to her heart.

This might be what they call a heart-to-heart connection.

Miyuki strongly felt that this was a recent development. At times she felt like this was telepathy, and at other times she didn't. No matter what the truth behind this feeling was, Miyuki was overjoyed at this turnout. Just being able to feel connected to her brother's heart filled Miyuki with happiness.

For Miyuki, to be able to detect her brother's troubles was something to be cheerful about. However, precisely because of this, Miyuki paid extra heed to what Tatsuya was troubled about. Since she knew that her brother was upset, there was no way Miyuki would pretend to be oblivious.

"Onii-sama."

In the end, Miyuki elected to ask him directly. Even if their hearts were connected, this wasn't telepathy, so there was no way to read each other's thoughts. Yet, even if she did have the power of telepathy, the idea of reading her brother's thoughts was so preposterous to Miyuki that she would never do this. Even if there was something she could accomplish with her power, she could not serve as her brother's strength if she did not know what to do. (As a side note, in the 21st century, research has proven that telepathy can only read superficial thoughts that had been converted into words.)

After receiving her brother's permission, Miyuki sat directly across from Tatsuya and questioned Tatsuya with a quibbling expression on her face (that she was unaware of).

"Onii-sama, is something on your mind?"

Even if this was a direct strike, this sort of questioning was probably a little too direct. Even Tatsuya looked at his sister with a dumbfounded expression, though that might be precisely the reason why he didn't try to muddy the issue.

"I'm just a little concerned about the circumstances surrounding Shippou."

"……Onii-sama. If you ever feel that you're unable to forgive his insolence, please let me know."

"Wait, wait, Miyuki. Don't be so hasty."

Seeing the malicious glint flashing in the depths of Miyuki's eyes that bordered on killing intent, Tatsuya frantically waved his hand left and right.

"Though it is true that guys' attitude is very rude, I don't mind in the slightest. Furthermore, when it comes to taking attitude with our elders, I'm in no position to say anything."

"Nothing of the sort. Onii-sama is always the model of impeccable behavior."

Although Tatsuya knew that this sort of response from Miyuki was practically reflex now, he wasn't going to debate this point now.

"What concerns me is why Shippou is pushing himself so hard. Refusing to join the Student Council, tangling with the Saegusa Family, even willing to antagonize upperclassmen."

"Isn't this because he never thinks about anything?"

Hearing his sister's fiery opinion, Tatsuya couldn't help but laugh even though he knew that she was being serious.

"No, that doesn't appear to be the case. Shippou has a powerful drive to elevate himself. Seeing him, I feel that he's not someone who would be hung up about not being part of the Ten Master Clans."

"……But if that's the case then this doesn't make sense. Normally, people would want to get into the Student Council to forge relationships."

"I also think that would be normal."

Miyuki seemed to have a revelation as she covered a corner of her mouth with one hand.

"Then, do you mean there's something abnormal in the background? Is that what Onii-sama believes?"

"Well, that may be the case……"

Just as Tatsuya was hesitant about speaking, Minami stepped into the living room accompanied by a verbalized "Excuse me".

In her hands, she held a tray holding several coffee mugs.

Seeing this, Miyuki wore an "Oh no" expression. Miyuki darted a malevolent expression at Minami, but Minami naturally averted her gaze as if she had not seen it.

"I brought the coffee."

"Ah, thank you."

Though Tatsuya was aware of the ongoing visual hostilities, he made no foolish venture to proactively intercede on this subject.

"That's right, I also wanted to hear Minami's opinion on this. Could you please take a seat?"

The reason Tatsuya said this was not because Minami was better than Miyuki at speculation.

Miyuki had been too heavily influenced by Tatsuya's cognitive style. Her perspective on anything would share Tatsuya's inclination on the subject. Tatsuya highly regarded this as a method to fill in the gaps of his own analysis, but now he wanted to hear the opinion from another perspective.

"Very well."

Despite saying this, Minami failed to sit down and remained standing by the table side. In her, Tatsuya saw a rigid adherence to professionalism, so he didn't waste any time pressing the issue.

"Minami, what is your impression of Shippou Takuma?"

"He is a foolish person who is unable to discern his own worth."

Minami's reply contained no trace of hesitation.

Across from Minami, Miyuki nodded her head with enthusiasm. Seeing this from the corner of his eye, Tatsuya reflected that "he asked the question poorly" and treated the ensuing headache as a misconception (not that it was really a physical headache anyways).

"—And the reason why you think this is?"

Tatsuya opted to listen to her rationale first.

In regards to this question, Minami again made no hesitation before answering.

"He's like a mad dog. He bites while completely disregarding the difference in his opponent's strength or the stakes. That sort of universal attacking stance is almost like he believes that he's the strongest or he must be the strongest."

Minami appeared to be quite outraged with Takuma as she atypically invested a lot of words to describe her opinion.

"Must be the strongest, eh……"

Though he had no way of telling how deeply Minami had thought of this, Tatsuya felt that her line of thinking might unexpectedly be the right one.

"So who is the one responsible for inciting him so?"

Tatsuya's question was directed to neither Miyuki nor Minami. This was only to help organize his own thinking much like talking to oneself, but Miyuki misunderstood him.

"Incite…… Is it the educational policy of the Shippou Family? Like the eldest son of the Shippou Family must be stronger than anyone…… Or something like that."

Strictly speaking, Miyuki's hypothesis was more in line with the Yotsuba's modus operandi. However, the three people present had so long been immersed in the Yotsuba doctrine that they remained unaware of this detail.

"No, I heard rumors that the head of the Shippou Family, Shippou Takumi, has a personality that is prudent enough to be called a little cowardly. If this is the Shippou Family's policy, then even ignoring their true feelings for the moment, they should be a little more focused on self-preservation."

"Tatsuya Onii-sama. I believe that rather than saying that Shippou Takuma has been incited onward, it may be more appropriate to say that this is the result of showering him with flattery."

Miyuki was the one who reacted to Minami's phrase.

"So there's someone who doesn't share Shippou-kun's interests and is trying to use him?"

"I haven't thought much on this level…… But I think what Miyuki Onee-sama said is correct."

Next to where Miyuki was nodding in agreement with Minami's words, Tatsuya also nodded internally. A crueler way of assessing Takuma was that he was being played for a fool. That was the sentence that came from Tatsuya's heart when he thought about the series of events Takuma instigated.

"Definitely something to be concerned about. So what is their goal…… Maybe we should investigate?"

"Are you going to ask sensei?"

Miyuki asked if they were going to call on Yakumo, then,

"Need to send a line to Kuroba-sama?"

Minami proposed activating the Kuroba,

"No."

To which Tatsuya shook his head to both ideas.

"I do not want to bother sensei over such a vague topic, nor can we ask for Oba-sama's assistance. That being said, going solo is……"

Tatsuya shook his head as if to dispel the cobwebs.

"Leaving him alone gives me a bad premonition…… There's nothing I can do, we can only wait and see for the moment."

Though this was a very passive conclusion, Tatsuya could not think of any other alternative. If an act of violence occurred in front of him then he alone would be sufficient to handle it, but investigations required time and manpower. This was another case altogether with a hacker of Sanada or

Fujibayashi's skills, but right now he did not possess such abilities. Tatsuya honestly decided to give up, but……

The god (devil?) of trouble appeared to have chosen him to be their herald.

Just as Tatsuya finished his coffee and rose to his feet, the telephone rang. Checking the caller ID displayed on the monitor, Tatsuya furrowed his eyebrows in surprise. The one who called was Fujibayashi Kyouko.

"Hello, this is Shiba."

Cooperating with his response, the monitor in the living room began to function like a video call in action.

"Tatsuya-kun, good evening. It shouldn't be time for dinner yet. Do you have time to talk right now?"

"Yes, that's no problem."

As he replied back, Tatsuya signaled towards the other two next to him.

"Ah, both Miyuki and Minami-chan are welcome to listen in."

That was normally the signal for the two of them to leave, but Fujibayashi acted first to have them stay. Was she trying to drag the two of them in, Tatsuya's might be overthinking this, but he was alarmed at how knowledgeable Fujibayashi's tone was when talking about Minami.

"In reality, this is in regards to the ruckus caused by the eldest son of the Shippou Family today."

"Please wait a moment."

Tatsuya interrupted Fujibayashi mid-sentence. The important news she was talking about was not something that he could just honestly accept from her without questioning.

"How do you know about this? Unlike the selection for the Nine Schools Competition, this wasn't publicized at all. Don't tell me you sent an agent to infiltrate First High?"

Hearing Tatsuya's question, Fujibayashi's expression was that of someone trying hard not to laugh.

"Looks like I should give her a reward. After all, Tatsuya-kun hasn't noticed that he's under observation."

"Observing me, eh……"

Tatsuya wore a slightly darkened expression as he asked this.

"Hm~, actually a little different. Not observing you, but observing the people around you. Looks like she has faithfully adhered to the orders not to observe you or Miyuki. That's probably why she has escaped Tatsuya-kun's notice until now."

"Why…… No, because I'm a Strategic-class Magician, right?"

"Why of course, isn't that obvious? How could the military just leave a Strategic-class Magician all defenseless like that?"

Completely free of guilt, Fujibayashi readily admitted to checking in on him.

"Let's just assume I asked who it is."

"Of course, there's no way I can tell you."

Tatsuya sighed and gave up pursuing this subject. Originally, Tatsuya wasn't exactly a member of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion with no strings attached. In addition, regardless of whether they were companions, he could understand the logic behind taking heed of a Strategic-class Magician's movements.

"I understand…… So, what about Shippou?"

Seeing Tatsuya setting aside this conversation and wearing an expression as if the conversation up to this point had never happened, Fujibayashi adopted the same expression she wore when this phone call began.

"I'm just thinking, you wouldn't happen to want to know who's their support, would you?"

Just as before, she said a phrase that hinted that she overheard everything Tatsuya and company had just been discussing.

"…...Why would you think that?"

However, even against Fujibayashi, Tatsuya wasn't so lax that he missed the bugs planted in his own house. And even if his house had been

tapped, Fujibayashi and her commander wouldn't be so stupid as to allow Tatsuya to catch wind of this.

The Shippou Family was one of the 18 replacement families that supported the Ten Master Clans. There was someone out there heavily influencing the son who would be inheriting that family. That existence was an unstable element that could not be ignored by the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion that saw magic as a critical element in national defense. Alternately, they had already obtained detailed information.

In regards to Tatsuya's question, she gave off the two answers he was expecting.

"Because I am interested."

However, accepting this answer literally was quite dangerous. This was not entirely a lie, but at the same, it was not the entire truth.

"Then, want to go looking with me? I just wanted to propose that."

Still, her proposal was exactly what he was looking for.

"Specifically speaking, what do I do?"

"Leave observing his dwelling to me. I was hoping Tatsuya-kun could pay a visit to Shippou-kun's supporter."

"I was actually hoping you would make that arrangement…… But why?"

"Because based on our jurisdiction, we should not be interfering with affairs within the nation. If it's Tatsuya-kun, then can't you use the excuse of an upperclassman at school acting out of concern for an underclassman? However, even under those circumstances, it's not like we can ask a student to do something dangerous like that."

But I'm OK!? A retort like that never materialized in Tatsuya's mind.

"I understand. If that's the case please allow me to offer my services."

"I will contact you immediately if we detect any movement. Then Miyuki, based on the above conversation, I will be borrowing Tatsuya for a little bit."

Hearing Miyuki's flabbergasted confirmation, Fujibayashi said her goodbyes to Minami as she hung up the phone.

Chapter 15

"Who betrayed us……?"

Zhou Gongjin furrowed his delicate eyebrows and skimmed over the report that was automatically changing pages. Creases were appearing between his eyebrows. It was very rare for him to display his displeasure to this degree.

Just now, the date had changed from April 26th to April 27th. However, this was beneath his notice right now. This showed how intently Zhou Gongjin was studying the report in his hands.

Zhou Gongjin halted the scrolling and lifted his gaze from the information terminal. After lightly letting out a breath, he reached for the wine glass on the table.

This was already the third time he reviewed this report and failed to find any errors in its contents. Although he didn't sincerely think that anything was wrong in the report, he needed to call on the assistance of a little alcohol to dispel the exhaustion brought on through a renewed verification of this unpleasant business.

This report was an investigation report regarding the progression of public opinion. Within, there were the results of using illegal methods to influence the impression non-Magicians held in regards to Magicians.

The report, quite the thick stack of papers if printed, displayed the rise in negative attitudes towards Magicians since the end of the previous year. The situation had noticeably worsened in the current month, a clear sign that his work on the media was reaping rewards.

Yet, this result failed to hit the expected parameters and clearly fell short of the level in his calculations. It was true that First High's self-demonstrative actions played an unexpected role in this, but that degree of irregularity should not have caused the deviation between the projected and real values.

"Even if we factored in Rozen's intervention that still doesn't explain this…… As expected, the reason is because there are publicity programs that have not followed our directives."

On the screen, he opened the daily totals for criticisms leveled at Magicians by various news sources. There, it was clear that not all had followed orders. In other words, among the televised news industries responsible for pushing the agenda that naturally included television, there were opponents who broke the agreement.

"To think they would do something so foolish like breaking our contract…… Violence does not align with my interests, but……"

Zhou only engaged in dealings on the black market, where no legally binding contracts existed. That was why he had to personally ensure that contractual obligations were fulfilled. Even if it was only a verbal agreement, no, precisely because it was a verbal agreement, he needed to employ a few tricks of his own – rewarding those who upheld their end of the bargain and punishing those who did not.

"Speaking of which, we have already entertained the cousins of Mr. Sun's nephew for half a year now…… It's about time to ask him to do a few things for us."

As for the traitors' punishment, Zhou elected to ask a friend to lend his assistance.

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Friday, April 27th. Today, Takuma was absent from school.

He was still this year's new student representative, thus making him quite a famous person among the Year 1 students. Many of his peers had heard about the incident that happened yesterday. With him absent the second day, all sorts of rumors flew through the floors of the Year 1 students.

—He huddled down at home after losing to the Saegusa siblings.

—No, no, he's huddled at home because he was censured by the upperclassmen.

—While injured, the shock of the defeat caused him to shut himself at home.

—He won the match but had to take responsibility for causing the ruckus, so he chose to stay at home to reflect on his actions.

—In the end, he was sent home to do self-reflection as punishment, and now he's home plotting his vengeance.

Among the rumors, the negative ones were in the majority, but some of them skirted close to the truth.

"Tatsuya Onii-sama. Takuma is also absent today."

In light of this, after receiving Minami's faithful report via e-mail about this, Tatsuya correctly surmised the reason behind this.

The truth of the matter and not the rumor was that Takuma had not been sent home to reflect as punishment. The (supposedly) correct portion of the rumors was that he was going to have a match with an upperclassman.

Known as magic exclusive to the Shippou Family, Million Edge was a Herd Control Magic that could be activated without a CAD. In essence, from the very beginning, the magic was a delayed sequence set in a state just short of activating and which used the caster's psions as keys to unlock invocation. Setting aside the difficulty of Herd Control for the moment, the concept of using delayed magic to bypass the CAD process was not a rare phenomenon. For example, the "Magic Bullet Tathlum" wielded by the Kennedy Family in England was a magic founded on the same principles.

Million Edge's uniqueness lay in the methods involved in creating the delayed state. Just short of activating, the technique was recorded down as incantations.

At first glance, this was the same method as replication techniques, but replication techniques required psions to flow into the incantations before constructing the Magic Sequence to achieve phenomenon alteration. In comparison to that, the Shippou Family's magic was a conditionally activated delayed sequence that did not require a Magic Sequence. When facing an enemy, there was no need to allot time towards that process.

On the other hand, this required that the magic's delayed sequence be recorded ahead of time. Replication only required the necessary information to construct the Magic Sequence, so even a machine could record the incantation. That was because it inherently shared the same properties as a CAD recording the Activation Sequence.

In addition, this record would be discarded after use. That was only natural given that it was a magic held prior to its invocation being released, which

fundamentally differed with the "repeatedly usable magic record" that Tatsuya sought. In short, Million Edge was a sort of magic that required intense amount of preparation beforehand.

In order to prepare for tomorrow, Takuma should be hard at work preparing the activating medium for Million Edge. Since he was planning on winning the match tomorrow, he couldn't be blamed for not coming to school today.

Speaking of which, the reason why Minami passed along Takuma's movements was because Tatsuya had elected to join the investigation regarding Takuma's supporters in the shadows. Minami was concerned that while Tatsuya was tied down during school, Takuma could be making contact with his supporters, but Tatsuya believed otherwise. Today was Friday. This was a time that even teenagers who were not magic high school students should be attending class. Even if he was not caught, wandering about on the streets would be awfully conspicuous. Plotting something nefarious (supposedly), Takuma would probably prefer to remain beneath the radar. Tatsuya believed that any contact with his shadowy support would be during the night. More importantly, Fujibayashi's crew that was monitoring the situation would naturally contact them about any movements.

Thus, until night fell, Tatsuya played the part of the high school student intent on his studies.

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"The reprisal target is Sawamura Yoshio. He is the CEO of Culture Communication Network, or Culture Net for short."

Zhou spoke to the young man sitting on the other side of the table, Robert Sun, as he put a leather briefcase on the table.

Robert opened the lid of the briefcase. Inside, he found an automatic pistol, a large dagger, plastic explosives with a wireless detonator, and a bronze ring.

"You want me to take care of that man?"

In response to Robert's emotionless question, Zhou ruefully smiled and shook his head.

"That was the original plan, but unfortunately Sawamura Yoshio is in Paris on business."

As he said this, Zhou handed a large, paperbound notebook to Robert.

Robert flipped through the rarely seen paperbound notebook at will. There, a picture of a young woman along with her Personal Data were found.

"So you picked the daughter as the substitute."

"I think that will send the proper message across."

Pah, Robert closed the paperbound notebook and turned his eyes back to the briefcase. His gaze was fixated on the bronze Antinite the ring was forged with.

"Does she have Magicians as bodyguards?"

"Wouldn't call him a bodyguard, but someone usually by her side. Still a child, but he's someone from the 18 Replacement Families."

"Is that so?"

Robert's mouth turned into a vicious smirk.

"Magicians created by the Japanese military……"

Strictly speaking, Robert's understanding here was faulty. The Ten Master Clans and the 18 Replacement Families included within the 28 families were all Magicians created by the Magician Development Research Labs and not actually created by the military. However, Zhou had no plan to correct such a trivial detail. For Robert, Magicians from the Japanese military owed his family a debt in blood. Zhou wasn't foolish enough to dash the man's rarely found, but burning, motivation.

"The preparations are detailed within. Though I can only provide rings for two, firearms and knives can be found for any number."

"That's enough. Leave it to me."

Zhou Gongjin smiled widely as he watched Robert Sun stand up with cellphone, briefcase, and notepad.



After returning home, Tatsuya was engaged in a rare study session when he looked towards the ringing alarm clock on the corner of his desk. That was Fujibayashi's signal. While he had not heard from her how she was observing the target, given that the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion was perpetually short on men, manpower was not a likely solution. More likely than not, she had invaded the personal identification program within the Street Observation System and was watching for Takuma to leave. If so, he was an accomplice to illegal use of public programs to invade privacy, but Tatsuya felt no guilt whatsoever. It wasn't like they were peeking in on the household, Tatsuya rationalized.

Rather than setting morals aside, it would be more appropriate to say that sort of feeling never registered with Tatsuya as he stood from his chair. Of course, this was in order to rendezvous with Fujibayashi. After leaving Miyuki and Minami to watch the house and giving strict orders for them not to follow, Tatsuya got onto his beloved electric motorcycle.

Before the eyes of Tatsuya and company, Takuma's silhouette vanished into a medium sized building filled with upper class condominiums. He remained unaware that he was being followed. At the very least, he took heed to avoid being tailed, but his ability to detect hidden presences was quite raw.

"Looks like the head of the Shippou Family chose not to send his son through military training."

"We might call it military, but it really only covers training for intelligence operatives. Speaking of which, why is Captain Sanada here with Lieutenant Fujibayashi?"

Tatsuya parked the motorcycle at the train station and was currently sitting in the back seat of a large limousine where they were observing Takuma enter the apartment. Next to him, Fujibayashi had an information terminal the size of a small calculator on her lap while Sanada was in the driver's seat manipulating the large touchpad.

"Talented but on rotten footing with the Ten Master Clans. Wouldn't he be a perfect fit in our unit?"

Sanada turned his head from the driver's seat to answer. Somewhat surprised, Tatsuya raised an eyebrow.

"Are you planning on inviting that guy into the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion?"

"Ara, is Tatsuya-kun against it? If you don't like Shippou-kun, then I guess we will just have to abandon that idea."

Tatsuya scowled in irritation at Fujibayashi's words.

"What is this? You're talking like I have the power to decide that."

"After all, 'Special Lieutenant Ooguro Ryuuya' boasts the greatest firepower within our unit. We can hardly afford to ruin your mood."

This was of course a joke on Fujibayashi's part. Still, getting upset here would get him nowhere, Tatsuya's instincts told him.

"……It's not like I dislike Shippou. So long as he does not cause trouble, I do not care what he does. Those are my feelings on the matter."

"So, you're not the type who is interested in fostering disagreements?"

Tatsuya ignored Fujibayashi's meaningless interjection.

"……So why did you lend your assistance for this investigation?"

Taking over for Fujibayashi, Sanada's question was perfectly legitimate, so this time Tatsuya broke his silence.

"If the ones behind him are similar to the guys from Blanche from before, then even settling Shippou would only cause another problem child to appear."

Halfway through Tatsuya's words, Fujibayashi burst into laughter. She was probably thinking "Who is the real problem child here?" – Tatsuya didn't mind that overly much.

"I see. Shippou-kun being naughty would actually be within acceptable parameters, but a second, third, or fourth would be dejecting."

"Maybe not dejecting…… But that's how it is."

The voice that Tatsuya used to answer Sanada seemed to be laced with sighs.

"Ah, looks like they're starting to talk, want to listen in?"

Fujibayashi asked Tatsuya with headphones over one ear. It appeared that the monitoring device planted on Takuma was beginning to catch his conversation with his "partner in the shadows".

(Pretending to be a passerby, Fujibayashi planted the monitoring device on Takuma as she walked by him.)

"Yeah, please do."

Hearing Tatsuya's response, Fujibayashi laughed in delight as she switched the volume over to the car's speakers.

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In general, Takuma usually wore a displeased expression. At least in Sawamura Maki's eyes, Takuma was just that sort of young man. Even when he was talking about taking the top score on the entrance exam and becoming the new student representative, he never wore an expression of someone in a "good mood".

However, today his mood was even worse than usual. Although he was trying to adopt his usual expression, Maki saw right through him. There was no way he could fool a professional actress trained to fake expressions, not to mention this was Maki, who, along with her natural beauty, was also #1 among new actors for her "face" that could act out every emotion possible on the silver screen.

"Takuma. I haven't dined yet today. Would you like to accompany me?"

If they cut right to the chase, she would probably have to listen to him complain until he had vented all his frustration. At present, Maki planned to use "dinner" as the means to buy some time for him to cool down.

"At this hour? Wouldn't that harm your appearance?"

"That's why it will only be a light one. It's almost done, so I'll go get it now."

Maki mentally awarded Takuma bonus points for not saying something impolite like "get fat" and walked towards the dining room.

She brought some snacks with thinly cut strips of bread with ham, salmon, tomatoes, and avocados on top. The meal certainly looked light, but there was no guarantee that the calories were also light.

Takuma had already eaten dinner, but he still took part in the snacks Maki made without hesitation. He was still at a growing age, so there were no worries about any disposition towards growing chubby.

For the next five minutes or so, Takuma's mouth was engaged in eating and drinking. In order to swallow the slightly salty snacks, Takuma was greedily consuming juice that he was unaware was tinged with alcohol. Nor did he notice the minute amount of sweet wine added into the snacks themselves.

When the "light meal" on the plates had just about been cleaned aside by Takuma, Maki used the voice of an "openhearted older sister" to strike a conversation with Takuma. (As a side note, this was when Fujibayashi switched over to the speakers.)

Normally unwilling to reveal his weaker side, Takuma was particularly chatty tonight for some unknown reason.

"……So, that's what happened. Takuma, you must feel like that was a lost opportunity."

Maki's melodious voice would have caused any fan to swoon as she comforted Takuma. Right now, she was sitting next to Takuma on the 3 person sofa as she laid a hand on his shoulder while scooting her face next to his while they were speaking.

"Forget lost opportunity! That was an unfair outcome from the very start! If that continued, my victory was guaranteed!"

Since beginning to speak, Takuma had already repeated this several times, but Maki hung around without any sign of irritation.

"Why of course, Takuma. In reality, you were the one who won. You should have won the respect and accolade that goes to the victor. The fact this was not so was simply because you were unlucky."

"Unlucky……?"

"Indeed. Although some people say that luck is also a talent, they are wrong. Those with true strength will ultimately prevail regardless of luck. However, a tiny match like this is very much subject to luck. There were also a few times where I unluckily got handed the poor roles."

Maki kept one hand on Takuma's shoulder while her other was laid on top of Takuma's fingers.

Soft flesh gently caressed Takuma's skin while the scent of honey stimulated his sense of smell.

"So that's why you'll be fine, Takuma. Yesterday was just bad luck for you. Such a small defeat will not impact your future."

"Really……?"

Despite repeating these words multiple times, Takuma finally exhibited a different reaction. Mentally sighing in relief, Maki felt that she only needed one more gentle push.

"Of course. So you need to get back on your feet."

Maki drew Takuma's hand to her own knee. Although seduction was against her principles, seeing Takuma so weak like this roused Maki's teasing side.

Takuma's hand gradually slid from Maki's knee to her thigh, all according to Maki's plan. She wore a loose gown that opened from the front. Though the sleeves were long, her bosom was wide open as the fabric was thin enough to allow hints of flesh to peek through. Through the dress, the feel of Maki's flesh was transferred to Takuma's hand, further chipping away at his self-control that was already unraveling due to the alcohol that lowered inhibitions.

Takuma flung aside Maki's hand and retracted the hand on her thigh.

In the next instant, his hands grabbed Maki's shoulders.

Maki only made token resistance to the strength that was pushing her down.

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"Ara ara, now we have a show."

In response to the plainly interested Fujibayashi, the flabbergasted look Tatsuya sent her way – failed to happen. He was neither dumbfounded by her behavior nor did he send a condescending look her way. Speaking of

which, Tatsuya wore a completely uninterested look that was a far cry from blushing with excitement.

"This might be a good opportunity."

As he listened to the sonorous voice coming across the monitoring device, Tatsuya spoke in a chilling tone.

"Hm, did you think of a ploy of some sort?"

With a highly entertained look on her face, Fujibayashi asked Tatsuya with deep interest.

"Recently, hasn't the media been in an uproar about an actress soliciting a younger man?"

Tatsuya spoke in the objective tone he normally used.

"……Blackmail?"

Fujibayashi's smile finally turned a little stiff.

"On occasion, we should use the media to our advantage."

"……Can't believe you were able to immediately make that sort of connection."

Sanada could devise the most vicious traps when it came down to his own techniques, but here his expression seemed to spasm as he expressed his own feelings. Still, he placed emphasis on the word "immediately", so he probably would have come up with this idea given sufficient time.

"Actually allowing him to go through with that would damage the school's image and may not be usable as a bargaining chip, so let's act while this is still in the realm of attempted."

Never faltering even in the face of Fujibayashi and Sanada's reactions, Tatsuya lightly made this proposal.

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After being pressed into the sofa by Takuma, Maki calmly observed him from this position. The delighted expression she wore wasn't entirely feigned. Though still less than Takuma, the alcohol in her own body had

also dulled the brakes of logic. However, even though her eyes were slightly drunk, she was still soberly surveying the dazed young man pressing down on top of her. Maki had long since developed the skill to separate her body's feelings with her mental exhilaration.

Thus Maki noticed the oddity even if Takuma remained oblivious. The screen door leading to the porch opened with a slight sound. Needless to say, the door was clearly locked but had now been pried open. Before all that, the porch was protected with a security system that had the greatest firepower permissible within the boundaries of the law, but had apparently been penetrated.

There was no sound of the alarm going off. The bodyguards were completely unaware.

"Help! Thief!"

Deeply regretting her overreliance on the security system, Maki screamed as she pushed Takuma aside.

Rolling on the floor, Takuma reacted to her cries.

He looked in the direction that Maki was watching after frantically getting to her feet. However, faster than he could identify the thief, his face was subjected to light contact. By the time he recognized that someone had thrown something at him, the irresistible Morpheus stole over Takuma as he once more fell to the floor.

"Takuma!?"

Owing to a burst of anxiety, her sleeve covered the corner of her mouth, causing the despairing cry to become muffled. She was very clear as to why Takuma fell unconscious. That was a trick of filmmaking, and she had seen the real deal while inspecting the props. The item that struck Takuma on the face was a soft ball soaked in highly effective sleeping medication. The duration of the medicine was very short, but that being said, he would be completely out of it for the next 5 to 10 minutes.

Trying to keep a lid on her terror, Maki looked towards the porch. The screen door and window had already been closed. Before the door stood a figure wearing a black mask dressed entirely in darkness as he or she was folding up the wings attached to their back. –That silhouette was practically straight out of the old films that used a bat as an inspiration. If only the

mask had had "ears" on top, it would have looked exactly like that. In fact, this garb was made from the camouflage material that absorbed electric waves, but of course Maki didn't know that.

"Milady, are you alright!?"

Now the two bodyguards burst into the living room. This was precisely when the stranger dropped the folded wings to the floor. Without verifying the stranger's posture, the two female guards saw him as a burglar and rushed him.

Maybe this was all because only one ball soaked in sleeping medicine had been prepared. The thief in black never moved from his location and met the charge. The bodyguards held police batons used for indoors combat. These were not simple rods, as police batons had handles made of elastic material and the sharp end wrapped in plastic had increased weight so the weapon could be used like a club or short rods.

The stranger easily caught the bodyguards' downward blow of the police baton. Without using the arm, the stranger used a glove-covered hand.

One diagonal step away, the other bodyguard had to loop around to the window in order to avoid obstructing the first one and was now in a position where only one of her two police batons could attack. In that case, only one weapon was in position to be a threat. Catching that baton would immediately restrict their movement, so he swung his fist towards the bodyguard who could not escape.

The female bodyguard was sent flying.

Seeing the fighting power of someone on an entirely different level, the other female bodyguard couldn't help but shake a little.

But the stranger was utterly merciless.

He once again swung a black fist.

Without being able to avenge herself, Maki's bodyguard was neutralized.

Standing before Maki, who was so terrified that she couldn't sit up straight, the stranger spoke in a voice that Maki felt she had heard before.

"Do arrange your attire."

It was only after he said this that Maki remembered she was partially unclothed. The dress had been pulled down so only the sleeves were unhelpfully covering her body. Thankfully her underclothes were still playing their part, but traces of her earlier activities could be seen all over her exposed flesh.

"Ah, mind if I cover myself?"

Maki put in all of her efforts to keep her body from shaking and put on a performance from early in her career that garnered rave reviews from her producer regarding her "graceful poise." If the stranger before her was a young man like she imagined, he would have pounced on her immediately. Although she had no idea what he was here for, so long as they developed that sort of relationship then she had the upper hand.

Yet, all of her plans were stumped at the very first step. Nay, she couldn't even reach the first step.

"Of course. Eh, if you feel that you're fine as you are, I don't care in the slightest."

Maki felt like someone doused her in cold water. The damage to her pride caused a cold fury to press down her fear. She arranged her clothing with an enraged look on her face.



"……That's better. Speaking of which, how long are you planning to wear that thing? It doesn't suit you at all, Shiba Tatsuya-kun."

The item Maki spoke of when she used a tone that warned Tatsuya not to take her for a fool was the black mask he wore while posing as Batman – that was actually a newly developed helmet made of soft materials. However, the part she really wanted to drop was the "Shiba Tatsuya-kun" portion. In other words, "I know your real identity", except that Maki was cognizant of the fact that even hidden beneath the mask, Tatsuya's expression didn't flinch at all. More like he was doing this to let her know.

"Then let us begin negotiating."

Tatsuya ignored Maki's provocation as if it was perfectly natural.

"Negotiate? To what end?"

Maki did not insist on respect due to her. Right now, she was firmly standing in the weaker corner. Based on the earlier scene, violence was out of the question and feminine wiles had no effect. Maki knew that her options were limited.

"First, please listen to this."

Maki was a little uneasy when his choice of words became polite. However, that thought fled from her mind when she heard the voices emitting from the information terminal in Tatsuya's hand.

Those were the voices of her and Takuma as they were entwined on the sofa.

"You were eavesdropping!? You pervert!"

Maki couldn't help but deliver her outrage despite how dangerous her statement was in her situation. Though she immediately thought "Oh no!", she was unable to control her involuntary reaction.

"I'm sure this would prove to be a major problem if leaked to the media."

However, once she heard Tatsuya's words after he stopped the recording, Maki froze in a way that was far cooler than calmness.

"Recently, there was a similar firestorm all over the news…… Apparently even a former idol past her prime can cause such a ruckus, not to mention a beautiful actress in her prime."

"What are your demands!?"

Maki curtailed Tatsuya's words as she screamed hysterically. In comparison to the young man standing before her with his vile threats, Maki was far more furious with her own carelessness.

"I have two conditions."

In complete contrast to Maki, Tatsuya made his declaration in a placid tone. His light baritone continued to trigger Maki's unease.

"First, break it off with Shippou. Ah, and I don't mean that way so don't play coy with me."

"I understand."

She was shot down just as Maki was about to lead the topic into that direction, to which she could only nod with a sullen voice.

"Second, please stop your activities with high school students and below."

"……What do you mean?"

Maki wasn't feigning obliviousness here. She was honestly confused as to the intent behind Tatsuya' request. Even if she could understand his meaning, she still remained in the dark as to why he would make such a request.

"I am unaware of the details behind your little plan. Maybe there is some benefit to Magicians, but I am entirely uninterested. However, can you please stop taking action in my immediate surroundings?"

"Eh……?"

Completely dumbfounded, Maki gazed back at Tatsuya behind his mask.

"Anyone in college and up is already an adult, so I do not plan on interfering regardless of what you do. However, that is all under the prerequisite that you are not acting against me. Will you accept these conditions?"

"Eh, hm…… If that's all there is."

She suddenly felt drained. For just this, he was willing to act like a bandit, she thought.

On the other hand, she felt terror clawing at her. Illegal entry, battery, blackmail. Every one of the things he did was unquestionably a felony in the eyes of the law. Yet, he never hesitated in performing these acts for mere trivialities.

This young man cared not a whit for the laws or authority of the country……

Maki suddenly came upon a revelation.

"Who the devil are you……?"

She asked in trepidation. Logic told her that not asking would be the right choice. Still, she couldn't be blamed for being unable to swallow that question. Tonight, for the first time, she truly understood how terrifying people with unknown backgrounds were.

"I will erase these files based on the degree of your cooperation in regards to my conditions."

She did not receive a meaningful answer.

"Thank you for joining me in this highly meaningful negotiation."

Tatsuya once more put on the "things that looked like folded wings" before dropping these arrogant words and stepping out onto the porch.

Maki frantically followed right behind him.

The figure of the young man in black had completely vanished from the porch.

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From above, Tatsuya verified Maki looking down from the porch before moving his body back. Currently, he was standing on the building's roof. The original plan called for him to use the glider he wore on his back to descend to ground level, but that plan was now subject to change after detecting a suspicious shadow in the sky.

The shadow belonged to a small flying boat. For an instant, Tatsuya thought this was related to the incident from two months ago regarding a

certain invisible flying ship belonging to one of the Intelligence Departments from the JSDF, but he knew he was mistaken upon taking in the shape of the hull. The shape of this flying ship denoted that it was the type used by news agencies or film companies to take aerial photographs. However, surely they were up to no good after painting the entire vessel black. If this black ship belonged to one of the film companies, Tatsuya was sure that their goal would be to take covert photography.

"Lieutenant, do you see the flying ship on direct approach for Sawamura Maki's apartment building?"

"Yes, I caught them. I was watching them since Tatsuya-kun visited the young actress's room. Still, never thought that they would be descending."

"Do you know who they belong to?"

"Based on its flight plan, it should belong to one of the television companies."

The corporate name that came from Fujibayashi's mouth was an entertainment station from the southern Kantou area. Apparently, they were listed as the competitor of one of the companies purchased by the group run by Maki's father.

"So they're probably looking for dirt on Sawamura Maki."

"The probability is not zero."

Fujibayashi's voice was filled with disgust, likely a reaction caused by covert photography.

"Lieutenant, can you turn off the psion radar around this area? Five minutes will be enough."

"You plan on halting the covert photography?"

"Affirmative."

On the other hand, Tatsuya planned on interfering with the covert photography because he didn't want to waste the time and effort spent negotiating with Maki. If Takuma was covertly photographed in Maki's room, that would be enough for a scandal even if they weren't caught in the act.

"Give me three minutes and I'll have it done."

It was Sanada's voice that conveyed that to Tatsuya.

"Understood."

Tatsuya used his right hand to pull out his favored weapon, the custom Silver Horn "Trident" and peered at the flying ship just as the ship opened a door to let down a rope ladder.

So not only are they engaged in covert photography but illegal entry as well, Tatsuya mentally murmured to himself while completely disregarding what he just did earlier and activated Leaping magic towards the opened doorway on the flying ship.

Tatsuya was unable to understand the angry retorts coming from the flying ship after he charged in. Although he felt it didn't sound like any language from East Asia, Tatsuya was not someone who spoke Beijing or Guantong dialects.

However, he understood immediately that the situation was not what he had imagined it to be. The fact that the men pointing guns at him were not from the television companies was blatantly obvious.

Of course, Tatsuya did not permit them to fire since his right hand was holding the ready-to-fire Trident. Switching decomposition targets barely took him any time.

There were five muzzles pointed at Tatsuya.

All of them lost their shapes as guns before clattering to the deck of the flying ship.

After getting hit by Tatsuya's Decomposition Magic, the men reacted with surprising speed.

The two men standing to the left and right of Tatsuya swung their fists. On their middle finger, they each wore a bronze ring that shone with light. Immediately, the interior of the flying ship was suffused with psion noise. That was the sign of Cast Jamming brought on by Antinite vibrations.

Two men on the inside brandished daggers as they closed in on Tatsuya across the wobbly deck.

Tatsuya squeezed the finger around the CAD's trigger twice.

Immediately after the magic that decomposed information structure wiped out the noise from Cast Jamming, all five miscreants fell to the deck with holes in their two legs.

However, the situation was not finished. Tatsuya saw that the man in the center had his left hand tightly clasped around something before he fell.

After being flung through the open door in the flying ship, Tatsuya fell through the sky.

In the next instant, a flash erupted with the sound of an explosion as the flying ship was covered in flames.

Tatsuya knew that falling down from such a height was no joke, but right now there was something far more pressing than his safety. There would be a major accident if that flying ship crashed onto the streets outside the apartments.

Amid the buffeting wind, Tatsuya turned his body around and pointed the CAD Trident at the flying ship with a broken balloon.

Falling from the sky, he activated Mist Dispersal.

Seeing the remnants of the flying ship fade away into dust, Tatsuya remembered to use inertia control magic. Immediately, Tatsuya felt a powerful impact strike his back.

The place where Tatsuya fell was the rooftop of a building that did not belong to Maki's apartment. The height of the building lowered the distance of the fall, partial activation of inertia control magic coming into effect and the glider on his back served as a buffering cushion. All three factors combined to prevent Tatsuya from suffering a full body fracture. Still, if not for "Restoration" activating, Tatsuya would probably have spent the rest of his life without ever getting to his feet again.

"Tatsuya-kun, what the hell just happened!?"

Even Fujibayashi's voice coming across the intercom had turned frantic.

"I'm not sure. However, I think we'll find some clues at the television company. That flying ship appeared to have been hijacked."

Tatsuya's unhappy voice also added that "though it might not be a hijacking and that the television company was their accomplice" before he erased any trace of his fall and stood up on the roof.

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The news that the attack on Sawamura Maki that Robert Sun was responsible for had failed quickly reached the ears of Zhou Gongjin. If this operation had succeeded, then the subordinate responsible for passing along the pictures of a daughter completely savaged beyond all recognition to the unfortunate father would have reported this to Zhou.

(To completely erase an enflamed flying ship as it fell from the sky…… The only one who could do something like this.....)

Unfortunately, no pictures were taken. There was nothing that could be gleamed from his subordinate's report, but based on the piece of information about the ship disappearing from the sky, Zhou correctly inferred the identity of the man who interfered with their operation.

(……Damn him. It's that man again.)

Though they knew of him, all they knew about him was the figure of him wearing a helmet to cover his face along with names like "Demon Right" and "Mahesvara".

During the "Yokohama Incident", the invasion force he had provided assistance to had also suffered terribly at the hands of this unknown Magician. The tremendous resistance coming from "Mahesvara" was literally one of the major reasons why the invasion plan failed.

The losses incurred by the Great Asian Alliance during the Yokohama Incident weren't exactly a loss for Zhou. Originally, he had hoped that the Japanese and Great Asian Alliance forces would bleed each other dry. The Japanese forces winning there ran counter to his expectations, but the weakening of the Great Alliance went according to his wishes on some level.

However, this time Zhou couldn't just laugh it off so easily.

(Looks like there is a need to uncover who he is.)

As Zhou thought along these lines, he also felt that it was time for a change in direction in regards to the media operation currently ongoing.

(In the end, the Master's true feelings on the matter are to have his revenge against the people responsible for bringing out Great Han..... The real target is not such a vague organization like "Japanese Magicians", but that clan in particular.)

And Zhou had an inkling as to who among those in power bore special interest towards "that clan".

(Though this isn't something outrageous like driving a wedge between the two, this might be worth trying.)

Zhou looked at a wine glass that didn't have a beak as he began to plot in his mind.

Chapter 16

Saturday, April 28th, 3pm sharp.

Under Hattori's guidance, Tomitsuka and Takuma found themselves in Practice Room #3 at the appointed hour.

Hattori was the referee for this match. Possibly out of curiosity regarding the casual relationship or simply a natural turn of events, Tatsuya was also present for Takuma's match as a witness.

Still, from Tatsuya's perspective, Takuma seemed to be free of any lingering side effects, both physically and mentally. The actress must have wrapped things up quite well on her end. Yet, at the same time, it was only reasonable to assume she had not formally "broken off" from him. For now, Tatsuya believed that additional observation was necessary.

Others present included Miyuki from the Student Council, Sawaki and Mikihiko from the Public Moral Committee, Kirihara from the Club Activities Group as well as other elites. Kirihara even brought his wooden sword and had received permission to bring his CAD.

They were here to forcibly intervene if necessary.

That was because this match carried a few special rules. To be precise, special exceptions like "unrestricted use of Million Edge" were added into the rules. In regards to Million Edge, usage would be permitted regardless of how powerful the spell became. Intervention into the match would only occur when the opponent would blatantly suffer injuries as a result. Nevertheless, the one who proposed this ruling was Tomitsuka, Takuma's opponent for this match.

It was possible that Tomitsuka had a trick up his sleeve to completely neutralize Million Edge. Highly put out, Takuma had also rationalized along those lines. This was practically saying that the Shippou Family's trump card was worthless. Still, this match was the result of Takuma protesting his defeat via disqualification, with the reason being his use of Million Edge. Hence Takuma welcomed the current rules with open arms and had no cause for complaint.

Currently, Tomitsuka and Takuma stood facing another across a broad stretch of space.

Today, Takuma also wore the uniform designed for outdoor exercises.

On the other hand, Tomitsuka wore the uniform for the Magic Martial Arts Club. The top half contained a long tunic without buttons that had padding around the forearms while the bottom half had pads around the knees as well as loose pants that only tightened around the ankles. On his feet, he wore soft sneakers used during fighting competitions. With protective gloves over both hands, all 8 fingers besides the two thumbs were wearing thick rings that served as the Specialized CAD input devices for the Magic Martial Arts Club. Each ring corresponded to one button and when the fingers moved (pressed by the thumb) or psions gathered around his fingertips, the signal for the Activation Sequence selected by his fingertips would be passed through the glove to the connecting CAD around his wrist. In other words, Tomitsuka had prepared himself very seriously.

Standing between the two of them, Hattori reviewed the rules. Not that there was anything in particular he had to explain as this was just a formality.

Quieting the two, Hattori raised his hand.

Tense anxiety suddenly spiked here. Everyone present could feel the furious clash of nonphysical waves, not psion waves, between Tomitsuka and Takuma.

Tomitsuka slightly fell into a crouch. Takuma placed his right hand on the book serving as his medium that was being carried in his left hand.

Besides the two in question, no one moved a muscle or emitted a sound. In the utter silence of the classroom, even Hattori breathing deeply in could be heard.

"Begin!"

Hattori's voice shattered the stillness and quiet.

The first one to move was Takuma.

Or rather, Tomitsuka neglected to act.

Takuma opened his "book" and used the fingers on his right hand to pinch several dozen pages. Takuma proceeded to rip those pages to shreds.

Scratch that, in the process of applying force, he was turning the pages into paper snowflakes.

There were approximately 80,000 paper blades that measured 4cm by 4cm. Rather than choosing to unleash Million Edge in its entirety, Takuma chose the finesse strategy and only wielded a small portion of his blades.

In response, Tomitsuka remained motionless as he watched the paper squares gradually close in on him. Based on his posture, he appeared to be gathering power. That appeared to be an accurate assessment.

The white paper squares dipped and soared as they advanced, like four giant snakes crawling through the clouds. The targets for their fangs were the left and right arms along with both legs. Takuma planned to first damage Tomitsuka's limbs to immobilize him.

The current of paper drew closer to Tomitsuka as the paper snowflakes decreased in length and grew in density. The attack stalled briefly before immediately picking up speed. The storm of paper blades wrapped around Tomitsuka's limbs with the intent of shredding his flesh.

At the same moment.

Tomitsuka's entire body flashed with an explosive psion light. Amid that blinding light, the paper blades faded back to being normal paper. All 80,000 paper squares lost their magic power to float in mid-air before returning to true paper snowflakes and falling to the ground.

Sawaki, Kirihara, Mikihiko and company couldn't help but raise an arm to block the light. Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Hattori all narrowed their eyes.

They knew exactly what that light signified.

"Was that Gram Demolition……?"

Mikihiko murmured in an astounded voice.

"So someone other than Tatsuya is able to use that in our school……? And someone in the same grade level at that……?"

Gram Demolition was perceived to be a rare ability that only a few users had access to. This wasn't Mikihiko jumping to conclusions, as this was both the truth and general consensus. He could hardly be blamed for his

shock that there were two such individuals at the same school in the same year.

"To be precise, I believe the term Contact-Type should be added before that phrase."

Miyuki was the one who supplemented Mikihiko's words.

"You are exactly right! As expected of Shiba-san, to be so knowledgeable on the subject!"

Sawaki nodded overtly when he heard her words.

"Speaking of which, Tomitsuka seems exceptionally fired up today."

As his senior from the Club Activities Group, Sawaki knew that Tomitsuka would use what Miyuki termed "Contact-Type Gram Demolition". This technique neutralized any magic that came into contact with his body. For a spell like Million Edge that used magic to continuously alter phenomena in order to convert plain paper into blades dancing in the wind, this was practically its nemesis.

Sawaki understood very well that Tomitsuka proposed these rules because he had complete confidence in himself. Sawaki himself was wary against Tomitsuka's Gram Demolition, but today Tomitsuka seemed even more vibrant than usual. This fact brought considerable joy to Sawaki. —As such, Sawaki also had a youthful aspect to him as well.

However, unlike the upperclassmen in attendance, Takuma had no time to feel impressed. He knew very well the meaning behind that earlier exchange: Million Edge was useless against Tomitsuka.

He only needed one attack to understand that.

(—No, it's true that direct assaults are useless! But two days ago, I just learned that different applications of the same magic will achieve differing results!)

Tomitsuka's eyes were pinned on him as Takuma bolstered his own confidence. Currently, there were openings all over Takuma. If Tomitsuka intended to, he could end the match in an instant. However, that would be pointless, as Tomitsuka knew that he couldn't finish this match in such a simple manner.

Finally, Takuma adopted a new pose. In response, Tomitsuka also raised the psions' activity level. Takuma's hand pretended to flip the pages as it surreptitiously stretched towards the CAD on his wrist.

The magic he activated was Air Bullet. Takuma sent seven Air Bullets shooting towards Tomitsuka at high speeds.

Without waiting to see the result, Takuma activated the next magic. Takuma never even considered that Air Bullets alone could defeat Tomitsuka. This attack only served as a smokescreen. Takuma used personal Acceleration Magic to loop around to Tomitsuka's flank.

Yet, Tomitsuka was already waiting for Takuma at his intended destination.

"Kuh, oof!"

He directly took the combination of a heavy punch and a left hook. Unable to keep his feet, Takuma fell to the floor. It was only out of sheer obstinacy that he still clung to the book that served as his medium. Takuma called upon his fighting spirit to dispel his blurred vision as he searched for Tomitsuka's figure.

Tomitsuka didn't follow up on his attack as he looked downwards at Takuma. Normally, this nice guy's face seemed a tad childish, but it now wore a derisive expression as he looked upon him like one looks upon a mad dog — looking at him. In Takuma's eyes, that was the current situation.

The sudden flare of heightened emotions surpassed his fear for the moment. One knee on the ground, Takuma used his left hand to flip through the book.

The first attack on Tomitsuka contained twice as many paper squares as the previous assault. This time the squares weren't split into four groups but gathered into one swarm. The greater the number of the "herd" in Herd Control, the lower the interference strength. By gathering the Magic Power from all four portions into one, Takuma was going to challenge Tomitsuka's Gram Demolition directly.

—Which was actually a feint, as the true blow was the next attack that was activated a moment later.

Bathed in the light released by Tomitsuka, 16,000 paper squares turned into paper snowflakes and fell to the floor.

As if bursting through the clouds, the 20,000 paper blades that were released after a moment's delay roared towards Tomitsuka's feet like a tornado.

Got him, Takuma thought. Gram Demolition was an ability that released a massive amount of psions at a time. Not only were they released, pressure sufficient to blow away a Magic Sequence was also required. There was no way he could use this repeatedly in such a short time.

However, Takuma's theory was in error. The moment that he realized that this was wishful thinking instead of a theory was quite a long time from now.

Twenty thousand blades were rendered into 20,000 paper scraps the instant they came into contact with Tomitsuka's body.

In regards to Takuma, who had just gotten back to his feet, Tomitsuka bestowed upon him the deciding blow of the match.

"That's enough. The victor is Tomitsuka."

After Hattori announced the winner's name, Tomitsuka bowed slightly.

Afterwards, he fell to one knee next to Takuma lying prone on the floor.

"Shippou, are you awake?"

Takuma groaned in what seemed like considerable pain, signifying his conscious state. That was because Tomitsuka intentionally struck him in such a manner and all went according to his plan.

"Thank you."

After coughing a few times, Takuma finally answered the question.

"Then, go ahead and sit against the wall to rest a while."

"—Got it."

Overcome by the magnitude of his defeat, Takuma obeyed Tomitsuka's instructions without comprehending the reason behind them. Clutching the area around his abdomen where he had been struck, he tottered and staggered to the wall opposite from where the witnesses stood. Leaning against the wall, Takuma gradually slid to the floor.

After verifying that Takuma had reached that side, Tomitsuka walked towards Tatsuya.

"……What is it?"

After Tatsuya's question, the hitherto taciturn Tomitsuka finally opened his mouth.

"Shiba-kun, I wish for a match against you!"

Drawing back to survey this article that was so difficult to verbalize, Tatsuya tilted his head and thought "Why?".

Surrounded by an array of shocked looks, Tomitsuka uneasily averted his eyes. Still, as if making the decision to cross the Rubicon — that might be an exaggeration, he wore the determined look of someone about to take a bungee jump as he endured Tatsuya's gaze.

"I want Shippou to witness your power!"

Tomitsuka watched Tatsuya with burning eyes. In his mind, he must have envisioned Tatsuya resonating with his manly display and nodding in affirmation. However, this only deepened Tatsuya's befuddlement.

"I'm not sure I understand what you are talking about?"

The moment he told him so, Tomitsuka became slightly harried in a rather fascinating manner.

"That, well, was kind of out of the blue. In other words……"

"Would it be possible for Shippou to see a match between people of outstanding caliber?"

The one who took over the explanations from the panicking Tomitsuka was Hattori. —Still, just these words alone were insufficient to dispel Tatsuya's mystification.

"In order to show him a match between people of sufficient caliber, wouldn't a match between Chairman Hattori and Sawaki-senpai be more appropriate?"

"Shiba, this only becomes meaningful if he sees how powerful you are."

Hattori's explanation remained incomplete to the end.

"Onii-sama, isn't this a wonderful idea?"

Nevertheless, the strongest supporting fire for their cause came to aid Tomitsuka and Hattori at this moment.

"I believe that providing a frame of reference for underclassmen is also one of the duties for Student Council members."

For some reason, all the upperclassmen and her peers (excluding Tatsuya) who were present mentally translated "Student Council members" into "Onii-sama".

"I also feel that it's about time to display Onii-sama's abilities."

Miyuki's motive was both blatant and not entirely in accordance with Tomitsuka and Hattori. There was significant frustration and anxiety lurking behind her smile, to the point that Tatsuya felt that "leaving it alone would be a bad idea".

"……Since you put it that way, very well."

Tatsuya changed his mind, or more like decided, and this should be exactly what Tomitsuka had desired. In spite of this clear turnout, for some reason, Tomitsuka's mood couldn't help but soar.

This feeling was not restricted to him alone.

Hattori had extended the appointment in this room precisely for this reason from the very beginning. All of the Year 3 students present knew about this plan. With the permission slip already obtained, they could begin at any time after clearing the practice floor.

"Please leave it to me."

Miyuki volunteered to clean up the paper scraps scattered all over the floor. After manipulating her CAD, there was hardly an instant's delay before air currents gradually began to move. The currents covered the entire floor in a complicated swirl and gathered all the trash into a pile in a few quick moments. Using the vacuum cleaner provided for the room, Miyuki disposed of the paper scraps.

Seeing her naturally perform a complicated and pristine magic with surgical skill, the Year 3 students watched her with impressed looks, Mikihiko and Tomitsuka let out amazed breaths, whereas Takuma once again suffered a

blow. —Excluding the process used to harden the paper scraps, the magic Miyuki just wielded far surpassed the technical difficulty for Takuma's Million Edge.

"Shiba-kun, do you think this is sufficient?"

"Ah, it's fine."

Tatsuya passed his coat to Miyuki before taking the field in his uniform.

"Would it be better if I removed my shoes?"

"No, you're fine as you are."

That sentence implied that Tatsuya would be fine even if struck by kicks from thick-soled shoes.

Following that, Tatsuya and Tomitsuka faced one another at the center of the field.

Hattori remained the referee. However, he skipped the explanation this time.

"Are you two ready? Then, begin!"

The instant Hattori gave the signal, both Tatsuya and Tomitsuka stepped off from the floor.

Differing from the earlier exchange, Tomitsuka aggressively charged towards Tatsuya's position.

Yet, Tatsuya's retreat was even faster. One leap took him to the other end of the practice room as Tatsuya pointed his pistol-shaped CAD at Tomitsuka.

The magic Tatsuya equipped was Decomposition Magic, Mist Dispersal.

Heedless of Miyuki's shock, Tatsuya pulled the CAD's trigger.

—And nothing happened.

(As I thought.)

Completely opposite from the pale faced Miyuki covering the corner of her mouth with one hand, Tatsuya wore an expression that signified that this

was within his expectations as he jumped to the side in order to avoid Tomitsuka's punch that had been enhanced by personal acceleration magic.

This was not him putting on a brave front, as he had already predicted that Mist Dispersal would be nullified.

In Tatsuya's vision, Tomitsuka's projection was covered by a thick cloud, turning it into a fuzzy outline. That was how he beheld Tomitsuka's figure through the Idea.

The dense cloud surrounding Tomitsuka's body was the psion armor that covered his personal information.

Gram Demolition was a Counter Magic that relied on psion pressure to strip the Magic Sequence from the target.

However, Tomitsuka wasn't using the psions like a cannonball to blow away the Magic Sequence. The thick layer of psion armor surrounding his "body" denied any invasion from Magic Sequences.

If Gram Demolition was artillery, then Tomitsuka's Contact-Type Gram Demolition was a wall of steel. Furthermore, that wall was not built from information and was only a massive amount of psions haphazardly wrapped around him. Even for Tatsuya, breaking through this line of defense to directly affect Tomitsuka with magic was no easy task.

In that regard, using the phenomena brought on by magic to attack could not be stopped by psion armor.

Yet, so long as Tatsuya still held onto the handicap of not utilizing attacks through the Idea, then he was a deficient Magician who could not use magic that directly influenced physical phenomena.

After his charge had been evaded for the 5th time, agitation began building in Tomitsuka's heart.

He who was known as Range Zero had no long range magic abilities. On the other hand, he was confident that he was twice as capable as the average person when it came to close-quarters magic.

Nevertheless, his attacks had been easily dodged.

He was not being avoided through magic, but by a combination of magical and physical techniques.

(Although I had my own suspicions, to think that he's capable to this degree……)

In all honesty, his awe was growing thanks to the caliber of his opponent. Yet, at the same time, his morale surged.

(But I'm not going to lose. I definitely can't lose at this range!)

Shippou vanished from Tomitsuka's consciousness. The purpose behind this match as well as the role he was supposed to play also faded within his mind. His entire will had been submersed in the drive for victory.

"They're both pretty damn good! I knew about Tomitsuka's skills a long time ago, but I never imagined Shiba-kun was just as capable."

"I'm actually more surprised that Tomitsuka can keep up with the elder Shiba in a fight."

Hearing the conversation between his seniors, Mikihiko could only feel astonishment. His opinion mirrored Kirihara's own. He never thought that one of his peers would be a match for Tatsuya in a fight. Mikihiko felt like this was the first time he had ever seen Tatsuya being pressed in battle.

Tatsuya had long since been able to just avoid Tomitsuka's attacks. Now, he had been forced to the point where he had to counterattack. Tatsuya holding the CAD in his right hand was a clear sign that Tatsuya surrendered that point. According to the rules of the match, using the CAD to strike an opponent was forbidden. Even excluding that detail, Tomitsuka's furious attack was pressing home on Tatsuya.

Suddenly feeling a little concerned, Mikihiko directed his gaze to one side.

There, Miyuki wore a completely invested expression as she concentrated all of her attention on her brother.

Sitting against the wall, Takuma was blown away by the battle unfolding before his eyes.

From a cursory examination, this was nothing more than a plain brawl. No, thanks to the occasional kick, this appeared to be a mixed martial arts

match. However, high level magic was behind every single blow. It was only because he had the talent to recognize this that the mental shock was amplified.

Tomitsuka closed the distance at a speed that the naked eye was unable to follow. Although he was using personal acceleration magic to raise the physical body's speed, this was nothing so coarse as "as fast as possible". Within the realm of conscious control, he held his speed at the upper limit of where his consciousness was able to follow.

Regardless, here Tomitsuka's pace grew ragged. The instant he stepped off to move forward, there was the misconception that the ground he stepped off from seemed to vibrate. Of course, this vibration was created by Tatsuya's magic. In spite of this, even if vibration waves appeared where Tomitsuka was standing, they were often nullified by (what appeared to be) occasional activation of Gram Demolition. Takuma had personally encountered this first hand. Nonetheless, the aftershocks that accompanied these vibrations were pure physical phenomena and could not be dispelled by Gram Demolition. If this was on muddy terrain or concrete, the aftershocks would probably not be strong enough to be detected. However, the floor in this practice room was designed with the appropriate hardness and flexibility to cushion falling without disrupting movement. Taking this into account, Tatsuya used magic to interfere from this angle.

His body had already taken everything into consideration until this disruption presented itself, so Tomitsuka paused briefly to maximize the fluidity of his body's motions. Using this brief opening, Tatsuya aimed the CAD at Tomitsuka and pulled the trigger. At the same time, Oscillation-Type Magic rushed towards Tomitsuka at such speed that Takuma didn't even have time to comprehend the deployment of the Activation Sequence. Based on the wavering psions, this magic contained both Oscillation-Type and Nonsystematic magic.

This magic did not possess the power to strike down Tomitsuka. Takuma hypothesized that this magic probably placed more emphasis on speed than strength. Takuma supposed that he was unable to recognize the Activation Sequence because it had been tuned this way or this was the CAD's effect.

That being said, not possessing the strength to strike down Tomitsuka was not the same as having no effect. After being struck by the psion wave, the

psion field around Tomitsuka's body also shook slightly. Turning into noise and smoke, the psion wave briefly dulled Tomitsuka's senses.

The next blow was the real attack. Using his left palm, Tatsuya threw a palm strike at Tomitsuka. Takuma detected that some sort of magic was being held in his left hand.

Once again, Tatsuya displayed a different attack. This time, Tomitsuka adopted a defensive stance. Using the right arm wrapped in Contact-Type Gram Demolition, he blocked Tatsuya's left palm holding Oscillation-Type Magic. In the face of a myriad different attacks, Tomitsuka only used one shield to continuously defend himself.

At this point, Tomitsuka's left hand jabbed towards Tatsuya's abdomen. Dodging was made difficult because his earlier attack had been blocked, and Tatsuya barely managed to slide across the blocking right arm.

Tomitsuka activated Acceleration Magic "Explosion". In the middle of casting this magic, Tatsuya used Gram Demolition to destroy the magic that was being activated.

In order to avoid the follow up attack, Tatsuya jumped far to the side. Takuma momentarily forgot to breathe as he watched this. He was unable to believe the sight unfolding in front of him and was terrified that his feelings as a Magician were faltering.

Tomitsuka's Acceleration Magic had been nullified during the cast. Using the interrupted phenomenon as a stepping point, Tatsuya activated his own Acceleration Magic.

(Is that sort of thing even possible!?)

Takuma wanted to shout out loud. If his internal shock was any lighter, he undoubtedly would have called out. It was true that for the same type of phenomenon alteration, the latter magic could be cast without suffering interference from the phenomenon alteration strength of the former. Since Explosion was an acceleration vector that expanded outward from the point of activation in a semi-spherical manner, accelerating to the side did not violate this principle.

However, that was merely not violating the principle. Takuma had never even considered the possibility of using another person's magic to create

new phenomenon alteration by moving in accordance to the physical rule of least resistance.

What was being displayed before his eyes was indeed the same "magic" he himself was using. They were techniques that belonged to the same category. Yet, his own magic was far beneath the level of the magic before him. Takuma had been completely defeated by the otherworldly duel erupting before his eyes.

(My attacks aren't landing!)

Tomitsuka was gradually growing more agitated.

The battle had not gone on for very long. Barely 10 minutes had elapsed since the beginning of the match. Yet, unlike his physical sensations, Tomitsuka's mental fatigue felt like he had been in combat for dozens of hours.

The current situation favored him. Without a doubt, his side held the advantage. Tomitsuka had complete confidence in that assessment. Although he had yet to land the decisive blow, Tomitsuka could feel that his attacks were beginning to tell even though they fell upon his opponent's defenses. Tomitsuka sensed that from contact.

However, Tatsuya was not the only one sustaining damage. Tomitsuka himself could detect the accumulated wear and tear building on him. While he had successfully blocked his opponent's attacks, the damage he incurred came from misconceptions and not his physical body. Yet, it was precisely these misconceptions that were steadily causing his shield to crumble. Each of the varied attacks sent his way were uniform in the sense that they all contained Nonsystematic Oscillation-Type Magic. The oscillation would rebound off the shield and dissipate, but in that instant, the vibration would carry over to the shield itself. That vibration would shake the psions, causing the psion field to expand as if heated, alerting Tomitsuka that the density dropped during those moments.

Tomitsuka himself was unable to fire psions at distant targets and could only maintain a field tightly surrounding his own body. This deficiency was precisely the reason why he was unable to use long distance magic. The magic scholar summoned by his parents explained that this phenomenon showed that his "core" heavily attracted psions, hereby restricting psions that normally flowed out of the body from doing so. On some level, the

Contact-Type Gram Demolition that Miyuki and Sawaki spoke of was the byproduct of his cursed physical disposition.

Tomitsuka had long since come to terms with his condition. After expending considerable effort to become somewhat able to use long range magic, he had turned this unique condition of his into a close combat weapon that could not be found on any other Magician. When facing purely physical attacks coming at him like the shockwave emitted by Sawaki's accelerated fists – the fact that the president of the Magic Martial Arts club bestowed upon it the embarrassing title of "Mach Fist" remained a secret only known to club members – this only offered a "slightly higher" level of defense, but in regards to coming into direct contact with magic, Tomitsuka had absolute confidence in himself.

In spite of this, the psion field that should only be able to contract was gradually expanding under Tatsuya's attacks.

This detail struck Tomitsuka in a manner that was beyond expression. This was not simple fear or cowardice, but the shock that came upon someone who peeked into Pandora's Box.

The psion field that could not spread out was expanding. Wasn't this that long cherished, but impossible dream?

Tomitsuka hurriedly stilled his leaping heart.

The one standing against him was not an opponent he could defeat while worrying about frivolous matters.

In order to settle this, he decided to use his trump card.

Tomitsuka's entire body was covered in psions. Beyond Tatsuya, everyone here to watch the match could feel them.

Tomitsuka's body accelerated at an explosive rate. —The only two who realized that this was not caused by personal Acceleration Magic were Tatsuya and Sawaki.

The psions that wrapped around Tomitsuka's body like a formless cloud suddenly grew organized. They were driven into place by Tomitsuka's will.

Far more precise than before, Tomitsuka delivered a mid-kick.

The Magic Sequence for "Heating" covered his leg. If struck by that kick, the damage would be equitable to being bathed in microwave electromagnetism. Using his elbow as the focal point for Gram Demolition, Tatsuya planned on blocking the kick fueled by Heating Magic.

Yet, Tomitsuka's right leg came to an unnatural stop an instant before coming into contact with Tatsuya's left elbow.

The Heating Magic was nullified by the Gram Demolition coming off the elbow, but for Tomitsuka, this was the expected outcome.

From his current position with the right leg extended, Tomitsuka used a right hook. No, that wasn't a right hook. He wasn't leading with the fist but the fingers instead, making this a palm strike. Still, his current bent posture was usually unable to deliver a strike with any force behind it.

Despite this, Tomitsuka's palm strike was both swift and vicious. Bending at the waist to block the kick, Tatsuya was in a position where he was unable to avoid this attack.

Pah, a lifeless sound rang out.

"Onii-sama!"

Along with a mournful shriek.

Tatsuya's body rolled along the floorboards.

Lowering his right leg and retracting the right hand while standing there only on his left leg, Tomitsuka blinked in shock as he stood there like a doll.

"……Tomitsuka is surprisingly devious. That rascal was aiming for the older Shiba's eardrum."

Kirihara saw that Tomitsuka's palm strike actually curved the palm to concentrate the air pressure on the point of contact.

"Ho, and he managed to jump away himself! Can't believe he managed to neutralize Tomitsuka's 'Self Marionette' even under those conditions. Shiba-kun, nicely done!"

By the time the two Year 3 students finished dissecting the exchange, Tatsuya had already recovered his footing. Sawaki correctly caught Tatsuya rolling away to widen the distance.

Tomitsuka's astounded expression came from the lack of any physical resistance that he believed was inevitable. If Tatsuya had stiffened his neck to prevent the head from shaking, then any stiffening in his leg and waist should have resulted in physical pushback on his hand. If he relaxed to jump back in accordance with the force of the blow, then naturally the contact would feel soft. In other words, Tatsuya relaxed at the same time that he applied force.

Tomitsuka hurtled any shock fountaining from his heart into the back of his mind as he activated Self Marionette again. This was a type of magic that only used Move-Type Magic to move his physical body. This Magic Sequence attempted to suppress the flesh's magical resistance as much as possible while prudently taking heed not to surpass the extents of the joints' movement.

This was not a magic that could be used haphazardly. In terms of design, modern magic could only mimic movements. Nevertheless, this could still create attacks like the previous one that should have been impossible according to human anatomy and physics.

Tomitsuka turned himself into a puppet master that wielded his own body like a doll and attacked Tatsuya in a manner that ran counter to martial theory. –And Tatsuya saw through the movements of the psions surrounding Tomitsuka's body.

Tomitsuka's entire body had been covered by a single Magic Sequence. It was an exceedingly complex Magic Sequence that even a high-class Magician would be hard pressed to recreate. Maybe it was because he didn't want them to interfere with the Magic Sequence, but the disorderly psions that surrounded his body were now neat and orderly, recreating an untouchable Eidos that only suffered Self Marionette to pass.

The disorderly chaos had transformed into an orderly world.

Order was both form and design.

Tatsuya's "Decomposition" could destroy designs. Although he was unable to destroy formless objects, he could deconstruct anything with a form even if it was the Eidos.

The formless cloud of psions wrapped around Tomitsuka now had a form created by Tomitsuka's own magic.

Through "Elemental Sight", Tatsuya understood this immediately. He also saw that this was an incredibly opportune moment for victory.

Tatsuya directed psions into his CAD. He was not pretending to use his CAD but actually using the CAD for Decomposition Magic. The magic he chose was "Gram Dispersal".

Tatsuya pulled the trigger.

With the form in hand, Tatsuya's magic that destroyed information shredded Tomitsuka's armor.

The exposed fighting marionette closed in on Tatsuya.

Tatsuya held a concentrated block of psions in his left hand.

The solid block was so sturdy that it could have broken through Tomitsuka's armor even if it had recovered.

This was not hiding his strength, but to achieve victory. Rather than choosing the magic he was most comfortable with but which still might be blocked by the incomplete armor, Tatsuya chose the magic bullet that would definitely pierce through the incomplete armor.

Designed and honed to clash against inhuman objects, the high pressure, high penetration Far Strike named "Penetrating Magic Shell" (by Yakumo) shot from Tatsuya's hand and pierced through the fighting marionette named Tomitsuka.

Taking a shot from the cannonball that had no physical form, Tomitsuka flew backwards. This was Self Marionette's side effect. Once he suffered a powerful blow directly, this impression would rewrite the variables for the Magic Sequence. Using a Magic Sequence that did not have a complete command interface caused the theoretical miscalculation that ultimately ended with Tomitsuka's defeat.

Sent flying by his own magic, Tomitsuka laid there with his limbs extended outwards and did not move a muscle. Since he was unable to restore strength into his relaxed muscles in time, he had suffered a mild concussion.

"Victor, Shiba."

After verifying Tomitsuka's condition, Hattori announced Tatsuya's victory.

"O……"

After murmuring "Onii-sama", Miyuki lowered her head. Forgetting herself, she was about to pounce on Tatsuya when she recovered her wits at the last second.

Tatsuya smiled gently at Miyuki when she raised her head.

Nodding at the brilliant smile coming from his sister, Tatsuya turned his body around.

He put the CAD in his right hand back into the holster and walked towards where Tomitsuka was lying on the ground.

"Tomitsuka, can you stand?"

Still lying on the ground, Tomitsuka used his right hand to tightly grasp Tatsuya's extended right hand.

"Thanks."

Getting a lift from Tatsuya, Tomitsuka finally got back to his feet. He appeared to be a little shaky, but his concussion didn't appear to be too serious. Tomitsuka's footsteps quickly returned to normal.

"As I thought. You're really strong, Shiba-kun."

"You as well, Tomitsuka. That hurt a lot."

Faced with Tomitsuka honestly pulling off his helmet, Tatsuya smiled back with his reddened face.

Next to them, a silhouette dashed by.

"Ah, hey, Shippou!"

Without turning his head, Takuma fled Practice Room #3.

◊ ◊ ◊

At the end of the Robotics Club's garage, an empty area next to the outdoors practice facility had become a sparsely populated location for private conversations.

Yet, Takuma had not come here for this reason. He happened to chance upon here after running away from the eyes and ears of other individuals.

Before the sizable tree that incidentally didn't have a "cursed" legend attached to it, Takuma stood there numbly for a long moment. However, maybe because he was unable to control the agitation welling up inside him, he suddenly began punching the tree with his right hand.

"Damn it, damn it, DAMN IT!"

He lost count of how many times he punched the tree.

"Stop it, Shippou. You're starting to bleed."

When his curses grew ragged, a voice called out to him from behind.

Takuma swiftly turned his head.

There, he found Kasumi staring at him in astonishment.

"Saegusa, you!"

Seeing Takuma glaring at her furiously, Kasumi raised both hands and shook them softly.

"Ah, don't misunderstand. I wasn't following you. I just happened to be here by coincidence."

After saying this, Kasumi walked towards the frowning Shippou. She pulled out a handkerchief and folded it into a bandage before grabbing Takuma's hand while he was glaring at her the entire time.

"What are you doing!?"

"Ah…… The skin peeled off."

Kasumi wrinkled her eyebrows at the blood and wrapped the handkerchief around the hand of the faltering Shippou.

"Sorry, I haven't been given permission to use Healing Magic. Remember, you're better off going to the infirmary later."

Takuma was unable to answer Kasumi's words. He could only stare at the handkerchief stained with his blood.

"Oh, and you don't need to return the handkerchief."

"……"

Standing in front of the completely motionless Takuma, Kasumi sighed deeply.

"You must have been soundly beaten."

"……"

"As expected, the upperclassmen's bar is really high."

"……Why?"

Takuma's eyes remained on the ground.

"Hm, why what?"

Finally seeing a reaction, Kasumi played along with another sentence.

"Why are those guys so strong!?"

A painful outcry. This cry must be what they mean by spitting blood, Kasumi thought. —As for who "those guys" were, Kasumi instinctively knew already.

"They're high school students like us, aren't they!? There's only one year's worth of difference! Even so, how are those guys so incredibly strong!?"

"Why does there have to be a special reason?"

"What did you say……?"

Kasumi finally felt like they were having a conversation, but she wasn't foolish enough to say that aloud.

"They must be strong because they are. True enough…… If you have to find a reason, then they must have worked hard to get to where they are, no?"







"I also……!"

"Yeah, you must have worked hard too. I did as well. Yet, surely those guys are stronger because they put more effort into it, right?"

"……"

"I'm not denying your talent here, OK? I too believe that a large proportion of my own power comes from my talent."

"……"

"But, a level of 'might' that is enough to stagger even me…… Surely that came from a different place than talent, don't you agree?"

Takuma raised his head and looked Kasumi in the eye.

From Takuma's eyes, a tear of regret trickled down.

"Well, I'm not exactly interested in something like 'might'. Since you want to get stronger, then that is your problem. Remember, Shippou's strength is something that belongs to Shippou."

Just as she said, Kasumi easily turned around and vanished from Takuma's sight.

Once again, Takuma vented his rage on the tree, this time using his palm instead of his fist.

◊ ◊ ◊

After splitting off from the Club Activities Group members with Hattori at their head, Tatsuya returned to the Student Council Room and sat at his own desk before opening the communicator. Typing away at the keyboard at a speed that could not be captured by the naked eye, the recipient of the message he typed was also someone currently in the Student Council Room.

((Yes, Master?))

Setting the target as Tatsuya, Pixie began communicating via telepathy.

((Have you finished changing the records?))

Avoiding the written documentation of the other Student Council members,

((It has been done as you ordered. A false recording has been uploaded instead.))

He received the answer he desired.

((Master, have I been of assistance to you?))

((Indeed you have. Thanks for your hard work.))

He bestowed words of thanks to the monster that was keeping the secret.

((You can rest for today.))

((Yes, Master. Entering Standby Mode.))

After giving orders for the doll to rest, Tatsuya erased the conversation record.

Epilogue

"That flying ship was actually stolen property. According to the television agency, the code used in the flight plan request was stolen as well."

Currently, Tatsuya was conversing with Fujibayashi over the phone installed in his own room.

The subject was the flying ship they encountered during that night. This was an investigative report on whether the ones responsible for the suicide attack on Tatsuya that led to his painful experience were terrorists or part of a criminal organization.

"Unfortunately, the only known quantity is that they are affiliated with a Chinese criminal organization."

Yet, just as Fujibayashi said, the results of the investigation were not promising.

"A Chinese criminal organization. Does that imply you already know their identities?"

"Hm, but not all of them. He was an opponent that had a history with you, Tatsuya-kun."

"……You don't mean No Head Dragon, do you?"

"—The remnants, yes. Robert Sun was a cousin of the nephew of Richard Sun, the leader of No Head Dragon. He has been confirmed to have led a helicopter jacking in the past."

"A nephew's cousin……?"

Tatsuya swallowed the words "wasn't that practically a stranger" that were on the tip of his tongue. That was because he recalled an example of someone who constituted a blood relation even on this level who happened to be right next to him.

"Well, that's practically an outsider. That's probably why only a few underlings followed him here after No Head Dragon's collapse."

Nevertheless, it seemed that anyone thinking along the same lines drew similar conclusions. However, this was not the time and place to consider such trivialities.

"Of course, last night's incident would be beyond the means of such a miniscule force. Whether they were conspirators or the ones plotting behind the scenes, some degree of support must have been involved……"

"And remains unknown, correct?"

"Indeed."

The situation appeared to be far graver than Tatsuya had imagined. Originally, an attempted terrorist attack in the heart of Tokyo was already a serious enough matter, and now they were supported in the shadows by someone even Fujibayashi could not catch hold of. Of course, they had to take into account that they had no evidence at the moment. Even so, this was not an opponent they could afford to underestimate.

Still, the thought that flashed across Tatsuya's mind was not "hopefully this won't become an issue", but a more selfish wish like "hopefully this troublesome issue won't affect Miyuki and me".

◊ ◊ ◊

Here was a bustling street at night. Slightly a ways off from the street, a certain small store stood in an alley.

Nakura used the weak light of a flashlight to verify the name of the store.

This was indeed the meeting place that was arranged with the current head of house, Saegusa Koichi.

If he had not known about this store, Nakura was certain he would have walked right past here. Opening the doors made of manufactured alloy that only held the distinction of sturdiness, Nakura took the stairs to the second floor. After being led into the room by an emotionless male employee, his opposing number for the appointment had been waiting for his arrival for some time.

"Have I caused you to wait very long?"

"Hardly at all. I just got here myself."

The one spoke as he rose from the chair was a fair young man who gave off a charismatic and vibrant air that Nakura could never hope to match.

"My name is Nakura."

"I am Zhou. Please, take a seat."

Unlike the male employee who led the way here, there was a cute and attentive young woman standing in the room. Following Zhou's verbal cue, the beautiful woman in the waitress uniform pulled back Nakura's seat across from Zhou's chair with a practiced motion. Seeing Nakura take a seat without a second thought, Zhou returned to his own seat.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"A good point. How about some white wine?"

Zhou's eyebrow arched in surprise. To Zhou's knowledge, very few guests actually took him up on that customary offer for a drink by ordering alcohol.

"……Would a normal bottle of maotai wine suffice?"

"As you wish."

The wine Zhou ordered was swiftly obtained. After the small glass cups were filled with wine, Nakura and Zhou watched each other's breathing and downed their drinks at the same time.

Setting the empty glass in the center of the table, Nakura carefully scrutinized Zhou's gaze.

"Nakura-sama."

The one who spoke first was Zhou.

"My master wishes to form a friendly relationship with Nakura-sama's master."

"My master said that there would be no problems agreeing with Zhou-san's proposal."

Hearing Nakura's response, Zhou revealed a devilish smile.

"Oh dear, your confidence fills me with dread. Then, shall we proceed to a few more concrete details?"

"Our side has already proposed our basic conditions."

"Of course, I am well aware of that. We would never do anything that would harm Saegusa-sama. After all, we do not share the Great Asian Alliance's interests."

"And what of the media operation?"

"That too we understand. We have already given the order to curb the propaganda work directed universally at Magicians."

"I see. Then let us discuss the finer details."

Zhou once more used his eyes to give an order to the female employee.

The beautiful woman serving as their waitress bowed deeply before leaving the room. Besides Nakura and Zhou, no one was privy to the discussion that ensued in the room.

References

1. ↑ Yami was using 'bokutachi', which is a form of 'we'(or 'our' here) usually used by boys.
2. ↑ For the curious, 三枝 became 七草.

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